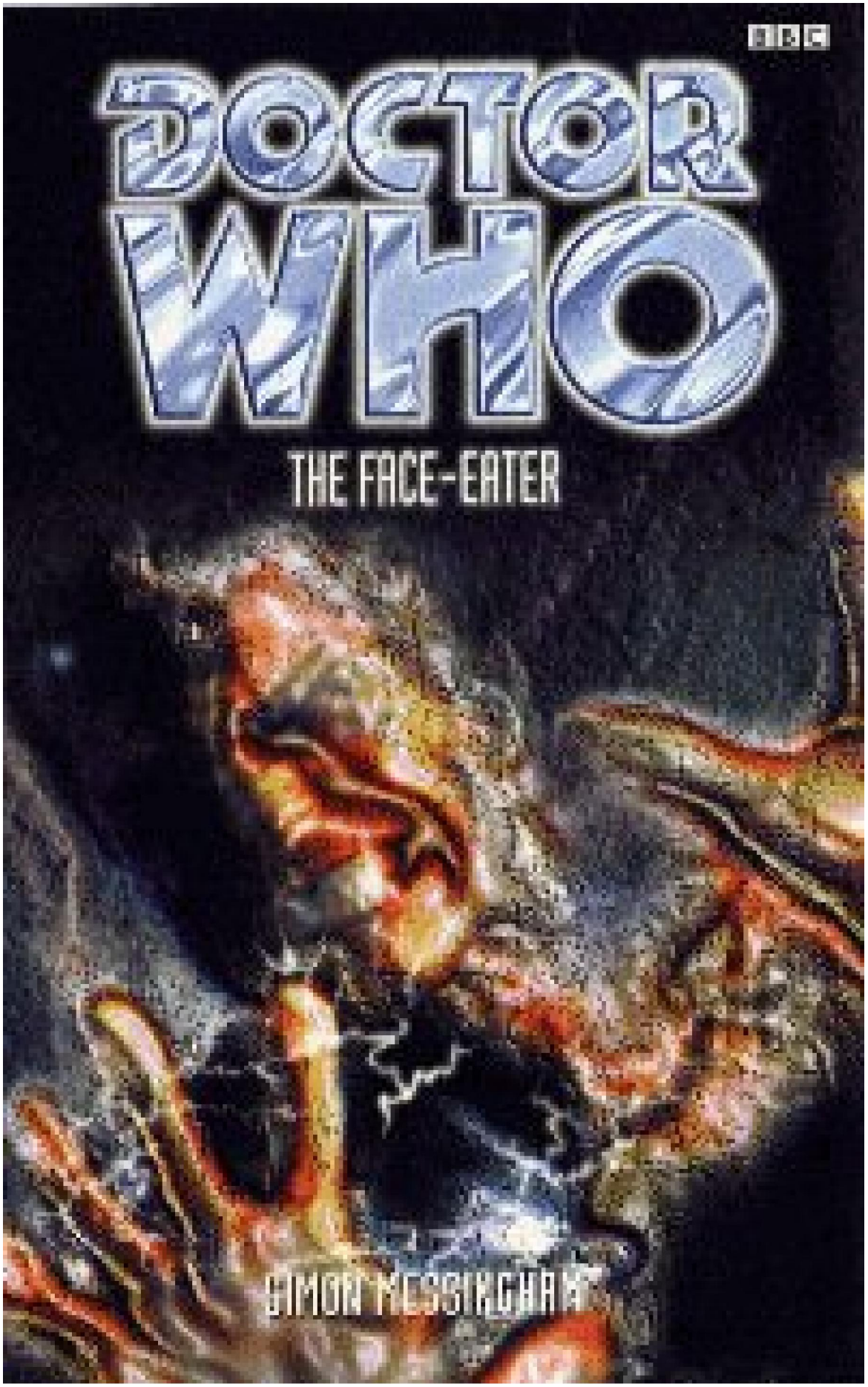
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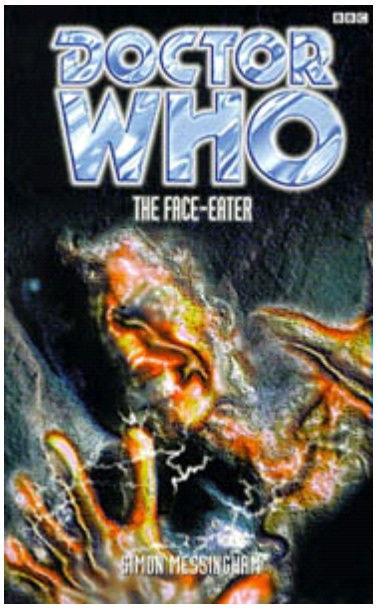

An Eighth Doctor Ebook
By Simon Messingham

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The Face-Eater
By Simon Messingham

Dedicated, as ever, to Julie

I am indebted to Norman F. Dixon's brilliant bookOn the Psychology of Military Incompetence , more mind-boggling than any work of fiction.

Also, Alexander Kirk for scripts and Comedy Nation , Caz for patient reading and rereading, as well as sorting out xenoanthropology for me, Mike for the wide-screen telly, and Tim Bollard - 'nightmare angel of the expressway'.

'... the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the delusion that there wasone more member than could actually be counted.'
- From an account of the early Antarctic explorers.

In the year 2128, Terran interstellar colonists arrived on Proxima 2 to build a city. This was Earth's first colony beyond the solar system. The economists of the New Earth Government and its corporate pioneers, the Global Mining Corporation, estimated it would take another eight years for supralight travel to become cheap enough to send a follow-up mission and begin deeper galactic exploration. The five thousand colonists, like the first European settlers into North America, were on their own.

IDENTITY PARADE

Chapter One
Ben Fuller

His name is Lopez. He is a heavy-duty block fixer from the Mexico sprawl. His arms are nutmeg brown and decorated with crawling blue and yellow snakes. Dark little eyes twinkle in the thickening evening gloom. Light from Big Proxima spills in like liquid.

Lopez looks around, not pulling at the ropes with which you have bound him to the chair.

You stay very, very still. Sweat on your brow. Your limbs creak with cramp and pain. You hadn't had time to conceal yourself, so now all you can do is wait, absolutely frozen, like those motes of concrete dust, caught in the liquid light.

You are watching Lopez.

'Hey, hey, hey! says the man in the chair.'You let me free. I ain't go'n do nothing. You jus'let me go. Comprende?'

You force yourself still. Can't move, not a muscle. That's how you fool them. You're certain of that now. It was about patterns. Seeing the order in randomness. Like those antique 3-D pictures mother showed you as a kid, souvenirs of an Earth you had never seen. Don't look at, look through. The patterns would emerge swirling from the void. A dollar sign. A woman. A face. Red Mars.

Don't look at. Look through.

You try and you think about other things. Anything to avoid your aching, cramping limbs and the sweat collecting in the small of your back.

You'd found Lopez at the Voodoo on Seventh. You'd been trailing him, him and two others. It was one of the three. You hadn't wanted to act until you'd been sure. Why? Do you really think there's still time for quaint notions like... like morals or respect or restraint?

Why Lopez? Not something you could define. Just that, when you had first seen him blinking in the neon lights of the bar, you 'd gone cold.

Lopez had been by himself. Drinking teq, ignoring the whacking bass thump of the juke. The Voodoo was dressed up like some old Hispanic taco bar - all red lights and neon crucifixions. You had never been inside. It was strictly low-class, real Third World. The barkeeper was some old injured heavy labourer, probably conscripted the same time as Lopez. If they knew each other, neither was letting on.

Your target had been waiting for someone. You were certain of that. Someone who was taking too long.

Two girls strolled in. Originally selected for support maintenance, you guessed, but now working a much more profitable trade. Lopez barely spared them a glance.

You felt like someone was flossing your brain, extracting a spinning, senseless jumble of memories: the red desert, your first swim through zero gravity on the orbital station, stroking Maddy's long black hair, a great sheet of glass.

Lopez made his move. He slid his teq across the table, wiping his moustache with a braceleted arm. Blinking, he stood and walked out.

You followed, fingering the pistol inside your ragged coat. And brought him here.

***

There had been an accident in Port Sector. Ben Fuller accelerated through the building site that was Proxima City. His squad car flashed the blue and red emergency lights reserved for the city's Security Exec.

As the dusty pillars of half-built towers rushed by, he found himself reflecting upon the nature of human achievement. For all their cleverness, for all the anticipated disasters of space disease and fanciful Armageddon, still the most common cause of mishap on this new planet consisted of objects falling on to people's heads.

Fuller braked hard and squealed off the flyover that provided the city's main communications artery. The squad car bounced as he took the exit at too great a speed. He cut loose with the siren as he forced his way on to the Port Sector slip road. Snarling wagons cracked their air brakes as they slowed. Already, thanks to the accident, traffic was backing up.

Ahead, Fuller saw the dirty grey haze of the Proximan ocean. Within a second, it had gone as the road dipped and the gigantic construction wagons blotted out the view.

Feeling like a minnow among whales, Fuller manoeuvred his nippy squad car around, between and even beneath the monstrous vehicles. The air was full of dust and exhaust, looking like fog in the Proximan morning sun. Fuller noted how quickly humanity had made its presence felt.

The Port Sector deputy, Jeffries, was overseeing the removal of the stanchion from the crater it had impacted into the tarmac. He wore his ever-present white cowboy hat. A good old boy right down to the Lone Star tiepin and pointed boots.

A wagon lay sprawled across the carriageway, like the sprawled bones of some fallen dinosaur.

Fuller switched off his lights and jumped from his car. A group of security cops saw him, threw down their cigarettes and started to look busy. Just as Fuller reached the wreck, a hard-hatted supervisor clicked a chain on to the spilled stanchion and waved at the crane operator to pull it clear. The chain tautened with a metallic shriek and began to rise. Immediately, Fuller saw the blood - a minute stain against the vast chalky white of the concrete. As the stanchion swung away, he saw the man in the crater. The medics had sedated him. Thank God. It was obvious he would never walk again.

Fuller wiped his mouth with his gloves. He was already seeing the outcome of this accident, the rest of the injured man's life. Once he had recovered, he would be reassigned to the Installation, stuck in some administrative post, given duties more suited to his newly acquired physical condition. Percival didn't tolerate waste. There simply weren't enough people.

Already, Fuller felt tired of this accident. He had better things to do. He strolled towards the delegation of angry workers. Clark was with them. They were watching their injured colleague being shunted into the ambulance. Impassive paramedics slammed the doors shut and sauntered round to the cab. In the distance, Fuller heard the bleating of the stalled traffic.

'Jeffries!' he shouted. The deputy snapped shut his electronic notebook

and jogged over to him.

'Chief?' The Texan drawl seemed exaggerated, a parody of the fat lazy lawman. Fuller always expected Jeffries to end his sentences wtih, 'Boyy -'

'Get your men working. That traffic needs clearing.'

'Uh huh,'Jeffries replied unhurriedly. Fuller wondered just what his Port Sector deputy did all day. They should have had the wagons rolling ten minutes ago. He watched impassively as Jeffries turned to the idling squad. 'Al! Yoss! Break out them cones. Let's get this show on the road.'

Not for the first time, Fuller wondered just how mistaken he could have been about this duty. Adventure, excitement. Wasn't that the idea? And here he was, traffic clean-up. Not to mention that other stuff, the real police work.

Leary.

The squad were starting to erect the usual props: signs, bollards, lights. This was going to be some day.

Fuller made his way to the workers' delegation. Clark and his cronies looked angry. Fuller understood. He guessed they had every right to be. But not about this.

'What's going on, Mr Fuller?' Clark snapped at him.

'Just what it looks like, Mr Clark. Another accident.'

The workers' representative was a big man, Hispanic like so many. Pulled from the slums of Central America and now finding his niche. 'Working Together for Excellence'. The slogan. Humanity's big gold dream.

Fuller liked Clark. He liked his tough talk, his tattoos. He liked Clark because he cared about his men. They were more than human-resource units. Something Percival would never understand.

'You know what I mean,' said Clark.'Ain't no such thing as an accident . What the hell was that wagon pulling a rig like that for? That's class-A cargo.'

Fuller refused to take the blame for Percival. He was aware that his English accent must sound snobbish, old-fashioned even. 'What do I know, Clark? I'm a cop.'

Clark smiled sympathetically. His gold tooth shone in the sun. 'What do you know...' He bent his head to the departing ambulance. Around them, the wagons were starting to rumble. 'Phillipe. Desk jockey now I guess.'

One of the gang, a Nigerian giant Fuller knew only as Marlowe, pushed Clark forward. 'What 'bout that other business?' he whispered. It sounded like a prompt.

Fuller knew what was coming. Weariness washed over him.

'Yeah,' said Clark. Fuller detected what he thought was reticence in his voice.'What about it?'

Fuller pulled the electronic notebook from his tunic. 'Not now. You better give me details of the ace-'

Marlowe strode forward and knocked the notebook from his hand. It hit the tarmac and shattered, uttering a shrill cry as it died. Someone gasped.

'What about it?' Marlowe said coldly.

Fuller sensed Jeffries and the others behind him. They would be pulling stun guns.

'Leave it!' he snapped at them. He looked down at the smashed machine. He knelt and ran his fingers through the components. 'You owe me a notebook, my friend.'

Marlowe was still angry. Clark pulled him away. 'We'll pay; he said quickly. 'He's just wondering what you and Percival are doing about that murderer.'

'Why don't you askher ? said Fuller. 'Before this gets out of hand.'

Marlowe was moving back now, eyes firmly locked on Fuller. Clark wiped sweat from his gleaming forehead. "This ain't no good. Something's gonna happen.'

Fuller nodded. 'I'll arrange a meeting. You just keep your boys under control.'

They stared at each other as the wagons moved round them. The air was full of their ozone stink.

Fuller was trying to think of something to say when Jeffries yelled out.'Chief!'

Clark nodded and Fuller turned back to his deputy. Jeffries was leaning into his squad car, mike in hand.'Chief!' he said again, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice. Suddenly Fuller knew what this was about. 'It's Leary.'

Fuller was already running towards his car.

***

What did you do? What do you want?

You who have no home. Severed from the mother planet.

Nowhere man.

Come with me. I can help. I can give you back what you have lost.

I can give you that back. I want to help.

Just look.

***

Fuller took the stairs two at a time. His mind ran over the tip-off, a barman in one of the dives on the cesspool that was Seventh. His mumbling, greedy voice insisted that he'd seen Leary and a second man heading for this, a half-built apartment complex.

A dim light burned on the third floor. Leary must have persuaded whoever it was to follow him voluntarily. The barman had said he was a heavy labourer, and even someone with Leary's almost mystical powers couldn't have pulled him kicking and screaming up these stairs.

Fuller had glanced briefly at the compulsory CCS display in the apartment's lobby. Spilling wires and blank screens revealed that nothing was up and running. Dust and planks lay sprawled over the half-tiled floor. Checking his stun pistol, he had ignored the elevators and headed straight for the fire stairs.

He probably should have been calling for backup and getting the place sealed off but he knew that Leary could get out of anything given time. He had to catch him in the act.

The act. This would be the third.

Fuller was breathing heavily, so he forced himself to calm down. There was no point leaping in on Leary only to faint through hyperventilation, no matter what the time pressure. Besides, he needed to keep quiet.

He reached the third floor to see a black corridor stretching ahead. Faceless doors, apartments for future citizens, blank and closed like cells. Which one?

Fuller tried to spot a light beneath the doors but couldn't see anything. Controlling his breath, he began a slow, crouching walk along the corridor. He tried to make himself alert for the slightest sound. The blood pumped in his ears; his lungs tightened with the exertion of the climb.

The dark kept flashing up pictures in his mind. Flashlit pictures of the previous two scenes of crime. Ultra-blue coldly illuminating white husks, blank eyes.

What kind of mind could think up this. What patterns could be found in these remains? What had surfaced in Leary? This psychopathology that had lurked in his mind, so subtle and quiet? Hidden deep enough to dodge the psychiatric profiling, designed specifically to prevent such tendencies breaking out on the fragile Proxima colony.

Unless the planet itself had done it to him. That was something no one could predict.

***

Lopez looks around in the dark, eyes glistening, fearful.

Stay still! you will yourself. No movement. Ignore the cold cramping your

limbs, ignore the dull weight inside your head, the straining of the neck muscles.

Lopez bares his teeth in a stretched grin. The signs are there. This is the pattern. The eyes. The eyes.

Now! you say to your unwilling, frozen hands. Now!

***

The gun blast shattered the peace of the corridor. Instinctively, Fuller threw himself over. His only thought was that he had been too cautious, too slow.

Something huge moved in one of the apartments. Number 29, two doors down. Fuller clapped his hands over his ears as an unearthly shriek, the screaming of some agonised animal, threatened to rupture his eardrums. What throat could shape such a sound?

For a second, Fuller felt a deadly chill, some ancient response to the unknown. It was the dark, screaming.

He forced himself to stay alert. Leary was here. Leary. This could be his only chance.

Angry with himself, Fuller jumped to his feet. He pointed his stun gun forward like a wand. He knew he was scared. Terrified. The thumping continued and this time there was a man shouting. A voice Fuller recognised.

As if the human noise had galvanised his frayed nerves, Fuller launched himself at the door of room 29. There was an almighty crash and a terrible, sickly green light flooded his vision. He fired the stun gun, almost instinctively. Somewhere, as if miles away, glass shattered.

Then a tremendous force, some push, lifted Fuller and threw him to one side. The unearthly green light trickled over him, like motes of bloated moonlight. He hit the floor, winded.

When he woke up, the lights of Proxima City were shining through the ruined apartment window. As dust filled the room, Fuller saw he was alone. The green faded from his eyes. There was nothing in here but a broken chair, torn rope and the stench of a discharged firearm.

***

Fuller emerged from the apartments just as Jeffries arrived with the backup. Fuller heard their sirens as he limped out through the lobby. Whatever had thrown him aside had bruised his right knee through the plastic padding. His mind still refused to rationalise what had happened in the room.

There was one thing he was becoming increasingly sure of. Jake Leary was not the man he used to be.

The cars screamed to a halt. Security officers, armoured up, poured neatly out into the street.

'You get him?' asked Jeffries as he jogged over to Fuller. His jowls were wet with exertion. His eyes shone with expectation.

Fuller shook his head, trying to blot out the red-hot pokers burning their way up his right leg.Jeffries cursed.

'Get those men inside. Search every room,' snapped Fuller. 'Probably won't be -'

'Did he... I mean, was there...?'

'A body? No.' Fuller turned back wistfully. He looked up at the broken window on the third floor. Just what had Leary been doing up there?

Jeffries tucked his thumbs into his belt. Real Texan style. 'We ever gonna catch that son of a bitch, Chief? I mean, he ain't human -'

Fuller cut him off. He was tired of Jeffries. His leg hurt and he needed to think. The squad could search until Christmas. Fuller knew that what had gone on in that room was beyond the bounds of standard police procedure. And certainly beyond the imagination of a forty-five-year-old ex-Texas Republic State Trooper.

'I want every atom of room twenty-nine detailed, Jeffries. I want everything recorded. The only way we're going to get Leary is to find out exactly what it is he wants from his victims. What he needs.'

Jeffries nodded.'Sure, Chief.You hurt your leg?' Fuller felt a numbing

laugh clutch his throat. 'I'm going home. To think.' He limped to his car. He'd forgotten to close the door when he'd run into the building. He lifted his leg with his hands and got himself into the driver's seat. The pain was intense but he felt it begin to wane just a little. He gunned the engine. 'Chief,'Jeffries shouted.

Fuller looked up at the paunchy cowboy standing in the entrance.'Yes?'

Jeffries suddenly sounded coy. 'You gotta get him. You're the only detective on the planet.'

***

When he got back to his apartment he took a long shower. As the alien water pummelled him he realised he'd got the shakes. He stood for a long while, willing his body to conform.

He pulled on a white robe and walked to the bay windows. The vast mainland mountains grew sheer in front of him. Fuller eschewed the dubious privilege of a suite in the Installation. He preferred to be out in the city, in the community he policed. Not a 'community' gesture, although maybe there was something in that. It was the mountains that he needed. He wanted that constant reminder of where he was. Of where they all were. How far away he was from home.

The mountains of the Proximan equatorial continental mass were like great fangs. There was savagery, there was beauty, but most of all there was difference. Humanity imposing its will on something alien, unknowable.

Fuller imagined what Proxima would be like in a hundred years. It would be as familiar to its inhabitants as London or Cambridge was to him. No one would spare a second glance at the mountains no one would spare a thought for those who had tamed the wilderness; those who had risked everything.

Fuller mixed a drink. He had long ago given up alcohol but still he crumbled a cube of bourbon flavouring into the sparkling water. He realised only too well how much his body had improved since he'd come off the booze. He was thirty-nine and in good shape. He remembered Lily telling him, oh an age ago, how he looked like a cop in a movie. Dark hair, strong face. Handsome, reassuring, friendly, someone you would rely on for protection. She used that word: 'cop'. Still odd from her

anachronistic upper-middle-class English accent. He had laughed.

Lily. Now, why had he gone and brought that back up? Suddenly he missed the sting that flavouring couldn't provide. He mused that no matter how far you travelled you still carried more than your baggage with you.

***

He sat and watched the giant sun sink behind the mountains. How could he figure out Jake Leary?

Percival was convinced the man was insane. A killer. It made sense. The Chief Exec wanted instant solutions, quick answers. Two men dead, their bodies... well, altered. An officially certified madman on the loose. It sounded reasonable, even to Fuller - a nice and neat answer to a dangerously destabilising situation.

If Leary was the killer then, no matter how bad the crime, it could be compartmentalised. The security squads could be dispatched, the man would be caught and killed; a report written. The whole thing would become nothing more than an irritant, a pinprick in the inevitable development of the colony.

Leary may not be the killer.

Which made things all the more tricky.

Fuller simply refused to believe in the swift, arrogant 'official' solution. He sifted what he knew. It wasn't a question of getting it all over as quickly and as painlessly as possible. Two reasons made that impossible, as far as Fuller was concerned. First, he knew Jake Leary. The man had been headstrong and outspoken, guaranteed to antagonise Percival, but always possessed a strong sense of compassion, of warmth. If he ever lost his temper it was because he always wanted reason to prevail. He had a belief in right and wrong, befitting his liberal/humanist personality profile. The only negative mark had been the man's feeling of dislocation, common among non-Terrans. Leary was aspace boy , part of the new breed, human but not born on Earth. They tended to be rootless, as if unsure just where they belonged. There was a high percentage on Proxima 2.

The second reason was less tangible, less easy to define. Fuller simply

didn't believe that humankind's first foray to the stars was little more than a question of supralight travel and building a city. Proxima 2 wasn't Earth 2; the same laws didn't apply. The mountains out through his bay windows were alien. No human had ever seen them before. They represented more than a new Himalayas, a new Alps.

Yes, Fuller knew about aliens. Earth hadn't exactly been quiet over the last two hundred years, but that was different. They were out there now, mixing it as his London friends would have said. Humanity was foolish to ignore its position.

Percival may want this over with, tidied up, brushed aside, but Fuller thought he knew the truth. If it wasn't Leary, returning from the doomed surveying expedition into the mountains, with whatever balancing system he had in his brain failing, then it had to be something else. Something not so easy to hunt down.

***

Fuller went to bed. He ordered his entsystem to provide him with Bach violin concertos. Outside, up on Seventh he guessed, the workers were winding down. They would be stretched out in bars, probably talking about Leary -possessed by the spirit of the mountain, said some - wondering who he would be coming for next.

He fell asleep, the music still playing, mingling with the noises out on the streets.

Fuller dreamed of Lily, of her hair, her face, her sweet smell. The last of the aristocrats, he called her, in love with the brilliant new graduate policeman, selected from hundreds to join the GMC Pioneer corps.

They had married, moments, it seemed, before he got her killed.

He dreamed of the day he had found her. Called in from one scene of crime to witness another, this time performed especially for his benefit.

The dream appeared impressionistically, like a badly edited documentary. He was there and not there, back in his own home yet still in bed. The heat of the Proximan night. Flashgun blue: the message scrawled on the wall - in her blood.

Dutch terrorists, rats crawling from the drowned ruins, bored kids from

rich families. Hunting them, in the newly formed World Civilian Police Corps, had been a game. Young Detective Ben Fuller, pride of the ECID. He saw his past self, cocky and confident. An office, full of men and women withinitiative anddrive and all the other things they saidgot you ahead . Playing entrapment scenarios on his computer simulations, playing the game with predictions, good at his job.

Cutting to: New Amsterdam, the shanty-town floating platform just off the new Franco-Belgian border. Young Fuller with the squad busting down the doors of the terrorist cell. 'Freedom for Nederland!' on the walls, a banner, like they wanted to be caught. Shooting.

And the medal. And Lily smiling. Her words, nakedly sincere, caught by accident in a press microphone to be broadcast to the world, 'I'm so proud of you, Ben.'

Fuller felt himself turning in the bed, heating up, confused by the shouting. Where was it coming from? 'I'm so proud of you, Ben.'

Then the call... no, no he didn't want to... mustn't remember this... shut it out... The Call.

Bringing him home, to Cambridge. The house in pristine order. Except for... for... so hot... so hot.

He'd heard the words, the vid-loop they'd left for him. One of them, in his rough-and-ready uniform with its orange patches, flickering in the unnatural projection beam. Over her body. The face in the image covered in rough sacking, a broad, horrible clown's smile painted over it, bright white circles for eyes, saying over and over again in a guttural, precise, gloating accent,'So prahd of you, Ben... so prahd of you, Ben... so prahd of you.

The face with its mad eyes closing in, getting bigger and bigger and bigger until all that was left was that sack head with its outsize, red smile and those white, white eyes.

Fuller screamed.

He thought he was drowning until he realised the bed was soaked in his own perspiration. Christ, he needed a drink.

Chapter Two
Clark

Luiz Clark had been waiting half a morning for his meeting with the Supreme Executive of Proxima 2. She was, apparently,too busy to see him.

To him, this was wrong. He should have been the first to be seen, what with all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. With all the decisions that needed to be taken.

He was a man of action, of responsibilities. Somehow, a way must be found to avoid such delays. He tried to resign himself and relax, though it went against his nature. He must try to think that this was how it always was. The bosses, no matter where or when, would always be too blind and too greedy to look at the real world, the world of men who did the work for them.

And now, an hour into the meeting, here in this little metal office deep underground, they had gotten nowhere.

Clark did not like Helen Percival. Worse still in his eyes, he did not feel respect. She was tough, of a good quality, but she lacked understanding. She didn't want to know. All she cared about was making the city work on time. She was like the old railroad bosses of his forefathers, all this talk of 'I don't care how itis done just as long as it is done' and 'all you do is whine'. Things were happening out in the real world, things she did not want to know. She had no respect for her employees, so where would be the respect for her?

Men are not work tools. His father had told him this. Men work, yes, but they are valuable, they have lives.

She sat in this office, deep in the Installation, wearing her company suit and signing pieces of paper. What she failed to understand was that this was just a part of the job, not the whole. She must respect the fact that they were side by side, the labourers and the execs, two halves, not one on top of the other.

Even now she could not face him. He looked at her trim, weight-regulated figure and her short, sharp, red hair and knew that he was wasting his time.

'I see no reason to continue this conversation, Mr Clark,' she said officiously in what he had come to realise was a Harvard drawl, staring at the banks of telescreens that made up the far wall of this large and comfortable office. 'You are determined to cause trouble. It will not be tolerated.'

Clark tried to remain calm. He was too cold in this room with its air conditioning. He felt awkward standing by the grey gunmetal desk. He felt like a little boy. He didn't want to lose his temper again. This, he knew, made him weak.

'I want no trouble; he hissed, knowing he sounded contrite. "The men and women who build this city for you, they are frightened. What will you do about this fear? This man Leary, he must be caught.'

At last, Percival turned. Her face was blank, she showed him nothing. Her face was strong but too remote. Even her voice sounded like a machine. She stared him down. His face became hot. 'Morale, Mr Clark,' she said. 'It all comes down to morale. I don't deny the fact that Leary is causing considerable upset. These murders are a worry to the whole community. We must, however, refuse to give in to these pressures.'

'Pressures... morale,' Clark found he could barely get these words out. He was disgusted. Percival continued, as if he was simply not there.

'What you must understand is that everything has been taken into account. Our psychologists predicted that mental disturbance among certain weak-minded colonists was inevitable, despite extensive profiling. If you look at the statistical analysis, you will discover that, notwithstanding these two murders, Proxima City's psychiatric condition is over sixty per cent healthier than the most optimistic forecast...'

'No!' At last he could no longer contain himself. He must speak or burst. He felt himself shaking, driven to anger by her meaningless words. He gave himself a second to calm down. 'We are not execs, Ms Percival. We are not from your GMC and your hi-tech cities. We do not see the benefits of your "better way of life". We are simple men and women taken from our homes, from our planet, to build this colony for you.'

'Is this about Leary, or are you planning a political rally?'

'You talk to me of profiles and statistical analysis. What do I care for

them? I know this, that my people are frightened. That someone, one of you, is out there in the night, coming for us. Just as last night he came for that man Lopez.'

'Everything that can be done is being done. He will be caught, then we will return to normal operations. We must not allow ourselves to be terrorised by some lunatic. The building of the city is paramount. It seems to me, Mr Clark, that this Leary business is a rather convenient cover for grievances of a more... political nature. I hope you're not thinking of doing anything rash. Our policy on unionism is quite clear and very punitive. You signed the waivers yourself.'

That was it. He had had enough. She was not worth talking to. He wanted to hit her, to make her see sense, but knew it would only make it all worse.

'If that's everything...' She sat down at her desk.

Clark found himself nodding violently, trying to keep ; himself calm. 'I think so. But one thing.'

'Yes?'

'You do not understand these people, Ms Percival. They are not afraid of Leary the man.'

"Then what are they afraid of?' asked Percival, and Clark saw that for the first time he had her full attention.

'They are afraid of what he has become.'

A smile broke across her impassive face. 'Which is?'

'A... a... spirit...' He searched for the word. 'A demon. From the mountain. We are from old places back on Earth. We do not pretend that we have destroyed such things with our bright lights and machinery. They walk, Ms Percival. They walk.'

There was a pause. She was staring at him. But she did not understand. She shrugged.'Really,'she said.'Well, when Fuller catches him you'll be able to prove me wrong, won't you?'

She picked up a light pen and began tapping away at the screen on her

desk.

Clark just wanted to get out of this hole in the ground, this Installation, out into the air.

***

When he was outside again, he resolved that if Percival wasn't going to do anything about getting Leary, he would have to do it himself.

He emerged blinking from the Installation elevator into the mid-morning sun, fierce and baking. The days on Proxima 2 were short and hot, the nights long and warm. Fresh droplets blown in from the shallow sea against which the city was couched provided a constant cooling shower. Not so different from Nicaragua, from his father's homestead on the Pacific coast. Only the dust he found uncomfortable - the air was thick with it. Not a natural product, rather the result of eight square miles of vast, constant construction work.

As he walked, and he liked to walk a lot, Clark realised how much he loved the growing city. No, not so much the city but the building of it.

He supposed he must be one of the few people who actually enjoyed living on another planet - four light years, they called it, from home. Sure, there were others, Ricky and Camilla and those who had built up Seventh, who more than appreciated the freedom this new life had given them, but that was different. They had needed to escape, for whatever their reasons. Crime, drugs, families, a million hard-luck stories now left behind. They loved what the city gave them.

Not him.

No, he loved the beast itself. The concrete, the foundations, the stone. The chance to build something decent and dean, for men and women to reveal themselves and their finest qualities. For Luiz Clark, he was site supervisor in an attempt to wrest life from where nothing had lived before. The biggest task in the history of humankind. Out among the stars.

He thought about the other city, the ten years he'd spent in the slums of the Mexico sprawl, in the filth and the flies and the gun gangs, chased from his homestead by the foreclosing Western Alliance government banks. How different this... this innocence. There was no crime here, no

major drugs, no corruption. He felt new and alive, reborn.

Only one stain blemished the dream. The murderer, Leary.

Clark had heard the rumours spreading among the construction workers. They talked of spirits, of evil, vampires, all the old poison. He thought of his own childhood, of the stories told to him by his peasant grandparents. Mr Bones, they said, as if that made it better. Work hard, they told little Luiz, be good, or Mr Bones with his top hat and feather will come and steal your breath. He had been frightened.

He and his father buried his grandparents; he had watched them fade and die. Grandmother had gone while he waited by her bed, six years old, sitting patiently, doing his turn. She had moaned once and stopped. No top hat, no evil laugh, no Mr Bones.

The superstitions were poison. Worse than the murdering. Leary's crime went beyond that. He was bringing the old | cancers here to this new place. Bring in the superstitions " and you open the gates to all the old evils.

He had to prevent this. He had to catch Leary. The tumour must not be allowed to spread.

He would stop this thing.

***

Clark reached his own office, a makeshift hut in Central, dwarfed by the gigantic foundations of planned global-corps-sponsored skyscrapers.

His first action when he got inside was to telephone Fuller. They were using land lines for communications in the city. One of the first things that had gone wrong on arrival was that none of the mobiles could be frequency-aligned. Nobody knew why, just another unplanned error. Something to do with the atmospheric conditions, said the maintenance technicians. Something to do with underbidding, said Clark.

He heard the fumbling of the receiver at the other end. Good,he was in.'Fuller.Who are you and what do you want?' came that strange English voice that Clark had only previously heard in old movies. He sounded tired.

'You OK,compadre ?' asked Clark.

'Mr Clark. What can I do for you?'

'Leary.'

There was a pause, Fuller trying to hide a sigh. 'Look,' he said after a few seconds. 'I've told you...'

'Mr Fuller. I have just returned from a very pointless meeting with Ms Percival. She plans to do nothing. I wish to catch this man as much as you do. I am offering my help.'

Clark sensed that Fuller was on the point of telling him to go to hell when he checked himself. 'All right,' came the voice.'What do you want?'

At last. Clark picked up a pencil. 'Let me look at the places where the bodies were found...'

'You know Percival wants that kept quiet. Besides, you couldn't call what we found bodies.'

'All right, just let me see.'

'Why?'

'Because, my friend, there may be somebody who saw something. They may not volunteer information to the Chief of Police but they may tell their old friend and protector Luiz Clark. If I knew where they were found, I could get my men talking to people.'

'It's an idea at that. All right. But, whatever comes to light, you must inform me immediately.'

'Agreed. It will be good to work with you, Mr Fuller. And, you never know, perhaps I will have the chance to destroy this cancer.'

Clark detected a change in Fuller's tone. A darkness.''This is security business, Mr Clark. Not one of your crusades. You find Leary, you tell me. I don't want any vigilantes thinking they can do what they like in this city.'

A warning, was it? We will see. If he found the murderer he would do

what he felt appropriate. He and his men. 'You sound tired, Mr Fuller.'

'Bad night. Listen, you want the Castanedes Tower, on the corner of West Eighteenth. Basement Seven. And I didn't tell you this, understand?'

"Thank you, Mr Fuller. One more thing.'

'Don't push it.'

'Why is Percival covering this up? What is she hiding?'

A final pause. "There is no cover-up. Goodbye.'

A click was followed by the hum from the auto-switchboard. Dead sound.

The corner of West Eighteenth.

***

Clark spent most of the day overseeing the concrete moulding. Service buildings, powerhouses and storage I centres for the shells of the large towers that grew around them. Now two years old, these towers had been built first, ' strictly positioned according to the plans of what he considered desk-bound 'consultants'.

They were behind schedule. The ground had proved less than yielding, much tougher than the initial surveys had suggested. They had been informed that it would be sandstone, easy enough to penetrate. However, appearances had been deceptive and nothing seemed to crack the stone basin.

Percival, after a great struggle, had finally conceded that the hydraulic drilling rigs lacked the power to bore holes in rock harder than granite. Clark had to admit he had felt a moment of triumph when she had grudgingly approved the use of blasting charges with which he and his men finally created space for the foundations. That was when the first colony casualty had occurred. An experienced demolition technician hit in the forehead by a fragment of rock that sheared through his hard hat.

It was at this moment that he knew that there was a grave disparity

between the dream they had been promised and the actual conditions under which they were going to be working. The technician's death was the first indication of a series of blunders and mistakes that put the whole city construction in jeopardy, culminating in the crushing of poor Phillipe in that road accident yesterday. He couldn't help imagining the stanchion, Phillipe watching it falling towards him, helpless to move...

Clark cast aside these intrusive memories as he pored over the blueprints for this generating station with his foremen. He was sweating in the heat. In front of them, like a gigantic toy construction set, lay all the components for constructing the building. Not big but complicated: lots of work to house the fusion generators that would replace their current overworked power grid. It used to amuse him that, for all their technology and computers, everything still came down to men like him putting the hours of backbreaking labour.

He couldn't stop thinking about West Eighteenth, about what had happened there. Why had he told Fuller he needed to see the scene of the crime? It was a clearly transparent excuse. He knew the building by sight, just another empty shell waiting for occupation. How come it was playing on his mind?

The cranes were moving in, Qwik-crete containers swinging over their heads. He got the nod from the Croatian mould expert. They could start the pouring. Clark nodded to his team. 'Get it cleared.'

The men and women strolled to their stations. Clark watched as Magda, the muscular Ukrainian, fired a flare over the marked and segregated dustbowl where the building would grow.

There was a flash of movement, faintly disturbing. Proximan natives, the Rats, scurried out from their bolt holes. It was a fact of life that, no matter how tightly they secured these sites, the white, stubby-haired creatures had an unerring ability to get into them. What was it about holes in the ground that they loved so much?

Only when some of the workers had started stun-gunning them for pleasure had the colonists found out how to deal with the problem. Despite a ban on such activities, the fact that the Rats were susceptible to loud noises and bright lights was a great bonus. Now, the firing of the flare gun had become part of the SOP in foundation work. He saw the flash, followed milliseconds later by the crack from the report. The Rats began to shriek and gibber. Clark remembered rats from Mexico. He

laughed as these ones bounded out of the foundation hole and disappeared out into the surrounding streets.

He raised his arm to signal the crane. There was a creak of the giant buckets and a hundred tons of liquid concrete tipped into the moulds. The air was thick with the stench of hot stone.

Clark had already stopped bothering about the building work. He lit a cigarette and walked back to his office. He needed to get up to that tower and see for himself what Leary had done.

***

It was twilight before he could free himself from his duty.Madre dios . Would it never end?

He was tired. The ridiculous meeting that morning had drained his energy. He let himself into the sparse confines of his apartment. Magda was waiting for him. She had lit a candle, a gesture Clark understood implicitly despite the continents that divided their ancestry.

He cracked open a tin of beer and allowed himself a brief moment of rest on the utility bed. He breathed deeply. The scent of the candle drove the dust from his sinuses. The flame was a glowing beacon in the dark bedroom.

In the kitchen, Magda was cooking galushki , the little wheat parcels he loved so much. Such a welcome change from the spiced, dusty tortillas of the slums.

She had been with him for eight months now, the worst-kept secret on Proxima 2. They had barely understood each other at the beginning: their skill in the international business language, called officially 'International American', insisted on by CMC, was still very crude. He had learned that she was descended from Cossacks, though he wasn't sure what that meant. She learned about his family's farm.

'I have to go out,' he said, once they had eaten and were lying together on the bed. He loved Magda's face, the pale fleshy cheeks, the green eyes half slanted, not quite oriental. A deep contrast with him, his olive skin and long black moustache. She seemed mysterious to him, a product of some strange country not constituted of heat, flies and dust. Perhaps he wanted her because of what she didn't represent. Another

clean slate, like the planet.

'Is it the Leary man again?' she asked, in those faltering, stabbing tones.

Clark nodded. 'I must see where the men were found. I need to know.'

'Why?'

Why indeed? He could not think of an answer. Something to do with respect for the dead, to find a link with their killer, something perhaps to do with the needs inside himself and his relationship with the city. Whatever they did now, no matter how untainted they could make the place, the murders would always have happened. Perhaps Clark felt he needed to reconcile the ground.

What had made him think that?

'Luiz?' asked Magda.

'Keep the candle burning. Until I return.'

Magda nodded. She was more superstitious than he. He didn't mind. 'The light is holy,' she said. 'It will keep awayPannochka '.

'Pannochka ?'

Magda smiled, strangely girlish for such a large, muscular woman. "The she-devil. The dark.'

***

Clark walked to the corner ofWest Eighteenth. The street itself was situated just off the outer ring road, right at the edge of the city. He could see across a half-constructed plaza to the quartz-dotted plain that led to the massive mountains shooting straight up into the night sky. Their crystal spires, huge and jagged, beamed twinkles of light at him. He had never been here before - it wasn't his area. This made him glad.

As yet the buildings here were unoccupied. The tower itself had no doors - just a large open frontage. It seemed like the mouth of a skull, the concrete a gleaming bone stretching over its black void.

He felt utterly alone, for the first time since they had emerged from the

bulk transport carrier that had brought them here three years ago. When they had looked over the gritty beach that they were supposed to turn into a city.

A wagon chuntered past on the overpass of the ring road. It roared like an animal in the street lights. Clark could see the driver, a tiny silhouette in the orange glow of his cab. The sight of him energised Clark. Men and women had built this tower. There was nothing to be afraid of.

He had half thought of getting one of his men to join him on this night trip. Some company would have made all the difference. Why hadn't he? There was so much he didn't know any more. Did he feel he was solely responsible for purifying the city?

Clark flicked on the torch and entered the darkened lobby. He swung the light around, trying to pick out the basement door. He found only direction signs stacked in a heap against the reception desk.

Thank the saints he knew the layouts of these standardised shells backwards. He strode in, picking his way over the piled tiles that lay waiting to become a floor. There was no light but for the torch and the ever-present dust that seemed alive with its own internal luminance.

He had been around empty, half-constructed buildings all his life but he never lost the sense of not being wanted. He was not superstitious like Magda - he refused to be - but still here in this place he could see why others were becoming so. Men may own this city in the day but at night, well, there was a new boss.

At last, he followed a dusty trail leading to what he knew was the basement door. He thought of Fuller. What did the English once call them? The cellar? A much less welcoming word. Cell-lar. He rolled the word over on his tongue.

The door was ajar. Blackness lay beyond. What the hell was he doing here?

There was a noise but he knew it had to be the building settling into its foundations. He must stop being stupid. There was something out there in the night but it was nothing but a man. For the sake of those who believed in him, the ones who had risked everything to make him their strictly illegal union representative, he must find Leary. Only then would they be sure.

He shoved the door aside and moved on to the stone steps. A black railing indicated the way down into the basement. He started to walk when his torch caught something in its beam. Clark found himself frowning. It was a feather. A white feather floating in the air. But there were no birds here on Proxima 2. 'Who's there?' he hissed, hearing the words plucked down into the dark.

He turned to run, already knowing what was waiting down there for him, but the door hammered closed, as if caught in some insane wind. There was the movement from above.

Controlling a scream, he saw the light catch the gleaming skeleton.

'It ain't Grandma,' said a voice that clattered out through I clacking teeth, and Mr Bones, top-hatted and giggling, dropped from the ceiling on top of him.

***

Ben Fuller was cursing as he drove furiously along the ring f road to West Eighteenth. Why had he given Clark the location? He must have been out of his mind. The man just wouldn't let things go. He cursed himself for not having the building guarded. Percival hadn't let him.

Fuller had rung Clark's apartment, only to be told by that Russian weightlifter of his that he had already left.

It had to have been the bad night that had made him give out that address. He never wanted to see the place again, not after -

If Clark had gone there alone, in the night, Fuller didn't know what could happen. Just that something would. It was a bad place.

He hauled the squad car on to the ramp and into the deserted street. Clark always walked if he could. Jesus, he hadn't even warned him.

Once again, Fuller didn't bother to shut the car door before dashing straight into the Castanedes Tower. Fresh footprints led towards Basement Seven. Clark was here.

'Clark!' he yelled,'Clark!'

There was no sound. Nothing at all. Fuller was trembling. Not again, please, not again. He hefted his stun gun. Was he destined always to arrive just after the nick of time?

He found Clark on the stairwell. Poor sod hadn't even got into the cellar. Fuller fell back against the wall as he stared at the blank, neutralised shape lying on the steps. The bloodless lips were stretched taut, a final silent scream of absolute fear.

Clark must have weighed two hundred kilos when he was alive. Now Fuller could have picked him up with one hand.

There was something next to the body. A bone? No, a feather. He heard something like a child laughing, down there in the dark.

For the first time in his life, Fuller failed to act in a professional manner. His bowels turned to iced water and he ran. He got in his squad car and drove away, his shaking hands tight on the steering wheel.

When he regained control of his nerves, he drove to the Installation. He flashed his pass to the guard, who unlocked the elevator for him. Once inside, he made his way to the communications section, red lights shining for night watch. Without the communications team seeing him in time, Fuller smashed the glass panel and thumped the red button that activated the emergency-assist code signals high up on POSSAT - the unmanned Proximan Orbital Satellite that monitored communications to and from Earth.

The emergency klaxon began to shriek.

Chapter Three
Proximo City

The city never sleeps. There is always work, fussy meticulous work, to make it healthy, to make it strong. The days are short; work must be conducted in tight, hermetic bursts of energy.

The city is growing - a living organism. Three years old now and looks like being a healthy baby. Its bones are solid and strong. The blood of labour pumps smoothly and regularly in foundations, subways, towers. Its eyes and ears and taste and touch and smell are attuning, sharpening, becoming sensitive and accurate. The city's attendants work ceaselessly to nurture and protect their creation.

An hour before dawn, the artificially enhanced plants and pulses in the hydroponics labs are harvested, processed, crushed. The resultant crop is flavoured, nutrients added. The boiling mass bubbles in great solidifying pressure chambers until, under the watchful eye of Patrice Kemall, Ordnance Exec, the auto-packing is allowed to begin. The final product is healthy and unquestionably tasty, if a little dry. Psychologists and nutritionists on Earth spent years perfecting a balance of vitamins, proteins and carbohydrates to survive recycling for eight long years. The workers of Proxima City must enjoy their food. Good food prevents social dissonance.

Today, however, the sixteen-stone Patrice is not on top form. She has been awake much of the night. Bad dreams. Images from her native Ghana. Not only are the workforce in a belligerent mood, thanks to that man who went to the mountains, but she dreamed the Tcho-Tcho man was banging on her apartment window, wanting her to come outside. She nods at the burbling chambers and signs the distribution release forms, barely looking at them. She can't get rid of the dreams. The wagons begin to roll.

Helen Percival is awakened by her alarm half an hour before the sun rises. Every day, seven days a week (assuming the Proximan week is seven days, which it isn't). Often, she sleeps only four or five hours out of any twenty-four.

She uses the last of the cool morning breeze to jog around the park, the lonely patch of greenery that covers the Installation. This is the only time she ever leaves her underground confines. The jog lasts twenty-five

minutes precisely. Percival is forty-two years old and is aware of the need to remain fit and active until the second colony wave arrives, so Earth predicts, in the year 2136.

After her jog, she showers and catches up on all the activity that has occurred in the city while she was sleeping, using the CMC colony net.

This morning she reads that the Port Sector traffic-accident victim, Phillipe, is recovering under the personal supervision of Dr Maeve Rupinder, colony chief surgeon. Rupinder will supply a fitness rating of C3 to the injured party and requests that he be allowed a month's recuperation before Percival assigns him to whatever administrative post befits a one-legged man. Percival signs the agreement form.

Other news: a case of mistaken identity in a bar on Seventh. Apparently, a plumber, Carlos d'Pul, formed the impression that a man drinking in a nearby booth was the wanted murderer Jake Leary. Then rendered unto him a savage beating.

The victim was eventually named as Karl Herzog, a Federal German legal exec from the Installation visiting the bar for the first time. D'Pul was arrested by the security patrol and found to have an excess of eighty units of alcohol in his bloodstream. Percival instructs a period of detention and psychiatric trialling. Herzog will be back at work later in the day.

Percival leans back in her padded chair. The Leary situation is getting out of control. Her sources out in the city have left her details of mounting unrest and agitation within the labour force. She suspects tough action will be required.

The final piece of news is the most disturbing. After discovering the body of the suspected union activist Lute Clark, her Security Exec Fuller has completed a statement confirming that he did, of his own volition and against all protocols, activate the extreme-emergency signal. When it reaches Earth, in about six months, GMC will be informed that the Proxima 2 colony is under threat of extinction.

Fuller is currently residing in one of his own detention cells after submitting to arrest by Installation security. He appears to be suffering from shock. Percival studies this report for half an hour. Elsewhere, as the day gets under way, others are making their own contributions to the life of the city.

Brendan Hart is coming off duty. He has just completed the delivery of Clark's corpse to the Installation mortuary. He is due to take his turn as pitcher later in the day at the regular paramedics' baseball fixture but he thinks he will give it a miss. This was the second time he's been called to that building and he's had enough of body-bagging. Especially something as drained and white and featureless as that thing. Hardly looked like a body at all. It was his partner, Kenwe, who pointed out that he was crossing himself. Something he hasn't done since leaving County Cork.

Arriving at the Proximan nest she has been studying for three months, Joan Betts, a xenoanthropologist, is confused by the way their numbers seem to be dwindling. Where are the little creatures going?

Sara Chen, port-side courier, is cycling across the spaceport tarmac. She knows that strictly speaking she isn't supposed to do this but, really, it's not exactly Hong Kong market, is it? Anyway, she can get a bit of speed up without those bloody wagons forcing her into the gutter. She registers, but hasn't time to assimilate, the new object standing in the middle of the runway; these documents need delivering to the Installation, like yesterday. The object is a blue, rectangular hut thing. With the words POLICE something something BOX stamped on it.

And Magda Wolchenka, Clark's partner of eight months, is not surprised to learn of his death. As she sobs in his apartment, she remembers the dream she had of her man floating up to their third-storey bedroom window and banging lifelessly at the plastic glass. Wanting her to let him in.

Chapter Four
Sam

Sam took one look at the place and, determined to test out her new resolutions, said,'It's Benidorm.'

The Doctor was poking around as usual, stirring up dust as he examined what looked to her like a piece of bent metal.

She decided to continue her soliloquy anyway, knowing that he was listening with whatever fragment of his concentration he had spared for her.

'Sun, sea and a building site. Probably once a quiet, unspoiled fishing village.'

The Doctor frowned. He seemed confused.'How so?'

'What?'

'This is Proxima 2. No indigenous aquatic life.'

'It was a figure of speech.'

'Ah.'

Sam kicked a pebble. 'I was talking to myself, Doctor. You should recognise the symptoms.'

The Doctor stood up. He was, of course, dressed in his long coat and cravat. No concessions to the weather for him. Behind him, the half-built white and copper towers contrasted sharply with the small dab of blue they called their home. Or their ship. Whichever way you wanted to look at it. In the distance a huge - no, gigantic - range of mountains shot up out of nowhere.

Turning round, she saw through a haze of dust a dull grey sea, about a mile away.

'Mid-twenty-second century,' stated the Doctor, walking towards the distant, placid water. He looked at Sam and she knew she had disapproval etched into her face. 'What's wrong?'

'The architecture,' she replied. 'Mass industrialisation. Destruction of the natural environment. The usual.'

'Exactly! A Terran colony world. And their first, if memory serves.'

Sam was not impressed. OK, she hadn't told him what she was trying to do but it was as if that stuff with Saketh and that had never happened. Didn't he realise how hard she was trying?

She had been waking up screaming in the night, feeling the scuttling of zillions of those microorganisms inside her body. How could she know? How could she work out she was still herself and not the vessel for the microlife that had so recently altered her?

She had to impose her will, stand up for herself. Stick to her principles. Take them to the nth degree. Isolate her centre, her Sam-ness, which distinguished her from that which was not-Sam.

She had decided to start with principles. She prided herself on her principles and, if there was one thing that principled anarcho eco-warriors like herself despised, it was the destruction of the natural environment. Which this was. In a way, she was pleased they had landed somewhere so awful. This would be the first test. She was going to impose her will and nothing would get in her way.

'Are you all right?' asked the Doctor.

Sam stared at him. He had a peculiar glint in his eye. 'Why do you ask?'

'You seemed possessed by some fundamentalist self-righteous "I don't like it so all I'm going to do is make moral judgements" kind of thing.'

'Just because I care about what's right?'

He smiled. Which annoyed her because the smile dissipated her bad mood. She wanted to feel self-righteous.

'Beware the person who knows they are right,' he said mischievously. 'Who knows what they'll do to prove it?
Come on.'

Not for the first time, she found herself stuck for an answer. She chased

after him as he danced energetically across the tarmac away from the sea.

The TARDIS had brought them to what was clearly a crude spaceport. Sam snorted. Remember who you are. Crude? How long had she been away from twentieth-century London? How could she think it crude? It was a spaceport .

All the same, the more she looked at it the more it seemed like a package holiday gone mad. All it needed now was a gang of Union Jack-ed mentals leering and vomiting and chucking beer cans.

'Samantha Jones,' she chided herself. 'You're a snob.' The self-realisation made her smile. OK, you're a snob. You can live with that. At least it's you.

The Doctor was leading her towards a gigantic, rusting hulk, the only spaceship visible. In the distance a new shift was clearly arriving for work. A stream of people, dressed in overalls, strolling into the buildings that lined the spaceport. None of them appeared to notice the two strangers walking along the faded runway.

The ship itself had been stripped bare, nothing left now but the struts of the infrastructure and the cylindrical exhaust portals bunched like mortars at its rear.

The Doctor stared up at the bones of the ship.'Fascinating,' he said.

'That is some serious rusting,' said Sam.

'Reusable hull. Saves cargo space. They must have needed the metal.'

'For buildings? Why not just live in the ship?'

The Doctor was walking right up to the giant skeleton. Only then did Sam realise just how big this thing was. They were still a good half a mile away.

As she goggled at its size, the Doctor went on talking. 'Probably not buildings. More likely melted down to build construction machinery. They'd discovered universal concrete by 2115. The buildings will come from the planet's own minerals.'

Sam wasn't listening.'It... it's huge.'

At last, the Doctor stopped. He put his hands on his hips. His flowing hair danced in the wind. 'Length: two and two-thirds kilometres. Diameter: one kilometre thirty.'

It took a while for that to sink in. 'Don't pretend you worked that out just by looking,' she said sardonically.

'Of course not,' he replied. 'It's the New Horizon . A piece of history. Terra's first large-scale colony transporter. See the exhaust portals. A very ancient prototype for what they called supralight travel."

'Very impressive.'

'Must have been cramped, though.'

'Cramped? It's massive.' Now he really was making it up.

'For five thousand colonists on a two-year journey.'

'Five thousand?'

The Doctor put his arm round her shoulders. 'Sam, two repeated questions I can deal with. Three would be vulgar. Let's look for the trouble.'

'Trouble?'

'What did I just say?'

Sam tore her eyes away from the spaceship. 'What do you mean, trouble?'

'Just before we landed, I intercepted a crude emergency signal. Somebody here needs help.'

'Help,' said something nearby.

The Doctor stared past her in amazement. A warm smile appeared on his face.'Did you say that?' he asked.

'Did you say that?' the voice returned, uncannily like his but much

clumsier, with a variety of pitches crunching up the words.

Sam looked around. The creature she saw could not honestly be described as cute. It was too hairless, too rodent-like for that. Its eyes were tiny black orbs. It was sitting up like a dog, its paws held out as if begging. Or praying. It seemed to be concentrating hard on the Doctor. It grinned at him, flashing dirty great yellow rat's teeth.

'Charming,' she muttered.

'Interesting,' said the Doctor. "The indigenous Me form, I presume. How do you do?'

The creature twisted its little head. Sam had the oddest sensation that it was studying them. 'Can you speak?' she tried.

The eyes locked on to hers. They blinked a couple of times. For some reason, the action made her feel queasy. Why? She'd met worse-looking things than this before. Surely it wasn't that bad. She felt herself frown. The creature frowned, too.

That was it - when it had blinked. Somehow it had mirrored the way she blinked. It was copying her body language. The stare was so concentrated, so forceful that it felt like an invasion of privacy. She felt a surge of irritation, remembering children at infant school who would play this game. Always for too long, after any amusement value had gone.'Can I help you?' she snapped.

'Help you,' beeped the creature. Sam took a step closer. 'Help...' it said. Then something she didn't hear clearly. It sounded like 'rrroun...' Round?

She took another step. The creature dropped on to its forelegs and bounded away, more quickly than she would have thought possible.

'Something we said?' muttered the Doctor, staring after it curiously. 'I wonder if he, or she, or it for that matter, knows anything about the trouble.'

Sam couldn't understand why she felt so put out by the creature. It was strictly in accordance with those principles of hers that she respect the behaviour and habits of any living creature, even if it was a horrible, mimicking git. 'Stop talking about trouble,' she snapped. "There isn't any. Look.' She pointed to the outskirts of the spaceport. 'Some outsize

lorries, people carrying equipment. The one uniting factor in their behaviour is, as far as I can discern, that they appear distinctly untroubled.'

The Doctor inclined his head. Sam turned to see what was unmistakably a police car, lights spinning, speeding across the tarmac towards them. Oh no.

'I think that, as usual, trouble has found us,' he said brightly.

***

OK, the deputy was a good ole boy. It figured. In an infinite universe there are an infinite number of possibilities blah blah blah... so why not a good ole boy?

Ha-way Pat-rolll. With all the trimmings: stetson, jet-black shades, stiff tan shirt, gun belt, beer gut.

His cop car was odd, solar-powered or something but still basically your bog-standard Texan police vee-hickle.

Sam had half expected a 'we don't like no strangers in our town' opening speech. Instead, Deputy Jeffries showed them no interest at all, not even wanting to listen to the Doctor's usual concoction of effusive greetings and 'We're not spies, honest, guv'. The usual not-quite-lies.

However, he didn't need to speak for Sam to know he didn't believe a word of their story. And he had never heard of an emergency signal. She was beginning to think the Doctor had made it up.

The ride was smooth and the car air-conditioned. It was only now that Sam realised just how dusty the air outside actually was. The Doctor had sat back and seemed to be asleep. Sam wasn't convinced. He'd just decided to save his energy for later. She knew he was alert to everything that was going on.

The city flashed by. Long, wide streets empty but for the giant trucks hauling their cargoes of rock and shale. There was hardly anybody about and everyone she did see was busy doing something. It was an eighties feminist nightmare, she thought. Planet of the Builders, arse hanging out of baggy jeans compulsory. Failure to flash knackered copy of theSun - ten years consigned to a creche full of Buddhists. Until she

realised half of them were women. The really butch ones.

She found it unlikely she would find any ponytailed young adventurers here for fun and frolics. They all looked too old, too conservative and too overworked.

The car powered down at the edge of a park. Jeffries pressed a switch and all four doors hummed open. 'Out,' he said in his lazy drawl.

'Most kind,' said the Doctor, who had apparently woken up.'Where are we going?'

'Follow me.'

He led them across the park, which to Sam seemed overly neat and tidy. Then she realised: this was the only bit of greenery she'd seen on the planet - lawn, bushes, even the shoots of trees carefully marked out with tape. And metal air vents, like fairy-tale Bavarian chimneys. Something underground.

Jeffries led them to a building that looked like a train-station waiting room in the middle of the park. Sam felt her forehead spring leaks of perspiration in the hot sun. A flesh-crawling dark stain was growing on the back of Jeffries' tunic. As usual, the Doctor seemed immune. He was eyeing the park as if taking a Sunday stroll. Every now and then he stopped and identified something. 'Terran aspen tree, I see,' he said to Jeffries. 'Genetically modified to cope with the climate.'

'Right,' was the only reply that was forthcoming.

They were ushered inside a waiting room and down an elevator into a lovely, air-conditioned underground complex. More guards, dressed a little more formally, i.e. in body armour, were waiting for them. Sam felt the old hackles begin to rise.

'Percival wants to see them right away. We'll take over now.'

As the guards led them along past a set of office doors, Sam glanced back at Jeffries. He had removed his stetson and was scratching his pink, somewhat thinning, scalp. Strangely, she felt some affection for him. Without the hat and the sunshades he looked a bemused little man. He hadn't been the worst policeman that had ever arrested her.

Then they were round a corner and he had gone.

All the time the Doctor had his hands clasped behind his back and was scrutinising the immediate locale. 'I presume this is the colony nerve centre. Underground to act as a final refuge.' His tone was quite neutral, simply informing her of the facts.

Sam decided that neutrality was not the way she felt about this standard-issue, dehumanising bunker. Principles, Samantha. Impose yourself. 'Well, I think it's foul. And I would have thought you'd have had enough of soulless metal buildings to last you several lifetimes.'

He smiled and that smile was so warm and forgiving that she couldn't help but be irritated by it. The silent guards ushered them towards an important-looking door. A smart sticker informed them in yellow that they were now entering GMC-PROXIMA - EXEC OFFICES - WELCOME.

Wherever you go, thought Sam, same old multicorps with the same old PR routines. I bet they give loads to charity and look after their mums, too.

The guards led them through a disturbingly twentieth-century-esque open-plan office, full of partitions, terminals, desks and pin-ups. Even a few fluffy bears to make it nice and homely. It had that stuffy, antistatic smell common to all offices. Shirtsleeved clerks sat at their desks administrating or whatever it was they did all day. A few seemed to be whispering lists of numbers into their phones. God this was basic.Company Persons . She hated Company Persons.

'Hello, I'm Steve Horton,' said a tubby, bespectacled Afro-Caribbean, after he had pulled himself out of his spring-singing seat to shake hands with the Doctor. He looks drawn, Sam decided. Probably spends twenty hours a day serving the great beast of interstellar capitalism. 'I'm Helen Percival's secretary.You're to go straight in.'

"Thank you, Mr Horton,' said the Doctor. Had Sam sensed a tinge of sarcasm in his voice? She must have.

'Coffee? Tea? Chocolate?' asked Horton.

'I'm perfectly fine,' replied the Doctor.Yes, thought Sam, he was playing them along. Good for him.

'We don't take stimulants,' she added for good measure. Not strictly true,but under the circumstances...

'Well, anything you need, just ask,' said Horton, without a hint of irony. What a drone. The secretary indicated a large padded door on the other side of the office.

They walked. This must be where the big bad boss lives, behind her multiscreens. She's probably watching us already. Horton opened the door and, with a cheesy smile, gestured they go in.

Yes, I was right, thought Sam. The usual setup: screens, big table, luxury. She was just waiting for the eye patch, the white cat and 'Good afternoon, Mr Bond.'

Helen Percival looked the type. Rigid business suit, tightly bound hair, emotionless demeanour. She sat reading a report, pretending not to notice them.

'Hello,' said the Doctor brightly. 'I'm the Doctor and this is my friend Sam.'

Percival looked up, a little nervously Sam thought. That didn't go with her view of Bondvillain.

'How did you get here?' asked the big boss, with one of those horrid transatlantic Loyd Grossman accents.

The Doctor looked at Sam, a look of resigned here-we-go-again on his cherubic fece. 'We've come to help,' he said hopefully.

Percival carefully placed the folder on to the desk. 'How did you get here?' she repeated tonelessly. 'You're not in any of our colony records. Personnel confirms that you did not travel on the transporter.'

'Perhaps we're stowaways,' said Sam. She liked it when they were confused.

'No,' replied Percival instantly. 'Not possible.'

'Actually, we landed about an hour ago,' said the Doctor. 'In your spaceport. We answered the emergency beacon you sent out.'

Percival was shaking her head. She seemed to be talking to herself. "There was no record of arrival. Has Earth technology advanced so much? I can't believe it.'

'There was talk of Oceanic-Nippon Bloc space development, ma'am,' came a voice from behind them.
Horton.When had he slipped in? 'Could they have -'

'Nothing like this,' said Percival.

'Does it really matter?' asked Sam smoothly. To make her presence felt (which she felt the situation demanded), she slammed her palms on to Percival's desk. Stationery went flying. It felt good.'You sent out the beacon and we've come to help. Isn't that enough?'

Percival glared at the intrusion to her ordered paperwork. She picked up a handful of spilled pens. 'I'm afraid not,' she replied icily, not looking at her. Looking at the Doctor.

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Sam turned to her always reliable, supportive friend and travelling companion. She tried to keep her momentum going. 'You see, that's the trouble with the new colony worlds today. They just don't know how lucky they are. Too busy raping the planet.' She had the dreadful feeling that, at this present moment, he wasn't going to be very reliable and supportive.

She had overstepped the mark. The Doctor was staring at her disapprovingly. Very disapprovingly.

She jumped when Percival threw the pens down on to the desk. 'I don't have time for this,' she said calmly. 'Who is
this... child?'

Right, Sam decided. The anger flared in her guts.You don't speak to me like that. She was all ready to lose it when the Doctor went all conciliatory.

'I'm sorry, Ms Percival. Sam, this isn't the time. The fact is, weare here. You can either throw us into your cells and spend weeks wasting time trying to determine our origins or you can tell me what's wrong. We'll do what we can to help, then we can be on our way again. No one will know we were even here.'

'We don't need your help. Nothing is wrong.'

'Why did you send the emergency signal?'

'I didn't. It was a mistake.'

'Are you sure?'

'Don't push me, Doctor.'

'Tell me about the unexplained deaths then.'

Percival paused. What unexplained deaths? Sam wondered. The Doctor was deliberately not giving her a chance to speak. Why did she feel chastened, as if they were tolerating a rude teenager? There was nothing more irritating than being talked over.

Percival took a deep breath and calmed herself. 'All right,' she said, harshly.'What do you know about them? And don't lie to me. I'm really not in the mood.'

'There have been some deaths,' said the Doctor. 'And they're unexplained.' His face was a picture of innocence.

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'Very clever, Doctor. Very tactful,' said Sam as she stared down at the cell floor.

'Do you suppose she thought I was being facetious?' he asked, scratching his chin. The door had just slammed shut, the uniformed guards having led them down here, somewhere in the depths of this Installation.

'It's distinctly possible,' she snapped grumpily. She looked up at him, sitting on the bunk next to her. His face was innocent and mournful, eyes wide and boyish. Sam felt her anger melt away. She tapped his knee.'I'm sorry,' she said.'It's my fault. I don't think I put her in a very good mood.'

He waved her apology away. 'Don't worry about it, Sam. I just don't think this is much of a place for eco-anarchist cant. And I think she thought Iwas being facetious.'

Sam laughed and leaned back on the bunk. Perversely, she felt more relaxed than she had in ages. Cocking everything up like this kind of proved her humanity, didn't it? 'Oh well,' she said. 'I got it out of my ecosystem.'

'Well, that's something, because I'm going to need you.' She sat up and banged her blonde head on the cell wall. 'Ow! What do you mean?'

He was troubled. Sam could see it in his face. 'Didn't you see how tightly wound she was? No matter what we said, truth or not, she simply couldn't accept that we were here. In fact, I would go so far to say that she would rather get rid of us than accept our help. The authoritarian mind. Responsible for more trouble than a fleet of Daleks.'

'Do you really believe in this trouble thing? I mean, everyone we've met has been completely calm as far as I can see. Could we have made a mistake?'We, not you, she noted. Another reassurance by default: twenty-one didn't make you old and wise. Not when you travelled with someone who was in his eighth or ninth century.

'I don't think so. She didn't deny that there had been deaths. And this planet - Proxima 2. You must realise that these people have taken a tremendous risk to get here. They aren't expecting any help from Earth. They're on their own in humanity's first utterly alien environment.'

Sam shrugged.'I still say it looks like Benidorm.'

This was supposed to be a parting remark. She was going to lie down, figure a way out of here. Instead, the Doctor caught her mid-lie and pulled her towards him. She felt his breath on her lips, not sure what proximity like this meant any more. As far as he was concerned, he was ensuring her full attention, having to get her to understand.

'And that's what they think, too,' he was insisting. ''They believe this place is just another country waiting to be exploited. They need to feel safe, to reassure themselves. But this isn't Earth. And, if they're going to get through this, we need to convince them of that fact.'

He let go, his outburst over. What's got him so worked up? Sam wondered.

There was one thing left to do. 'Doctor,' she said softly.

'Hmm?'

'I'm sorry I went off in there. I've been... well, you know, the microorganisms and all that. I promise not to act like a spoilt, obnoxious sixth-former again.'

He grinned.'Don't be too hard on yourself. I promise not to put on a white robe and sit in the lotus position dispensing mystical sophistry.'

She didn't know what to say. She felt a pause like a block of perspex between them. There was still so much she needed to know about herself.

'Now!' he suddenly snapped. Sam jumped. She imagined the perspex shattering on the cell floor.'Let's find out what's going on here.'

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Six hours of really very interesting waiting later, Percival brought someone in to see them. Another policeman. Some sort of sheriff? He seemed pale and drawn, despite his suntanned face.

'This is our Security Exec, Ben Fuller,' said Percival, waving away the guards. 'I want to get this thing sorted out. I want to know exactly what's going on between you three.'

The cop, Fuller, seemed just as surprised as they were by this demand. Sam thought he looked sad, in the way that many people she had met did, just after some tragedy had brought the sky crashing down on them.

Actually, she liked the look of him. Handsome in an old-fashioned, upper-class, Mr Darcy sort of way. He had a reassurance about him. You knew he would stand up for what he wanted.

The Doctor hung back in the cell, lying on a bunk. He didn't sit up, just stared at the ceiling.'I take it you set off the emergency alarm, Mr Fuller,' he stated simply.

Fuller's eyes widened just slightly. Surprised but not thrown, Sam decided.

'Yes,' he replied simply. He's in shock, Sam thought. I know that glazed

look of old.

'Why?' she asked.

'That's what I'd like to know,' said Percival, obviously determined to get a result. Give it a rest, Sam thought, the man needs space.

She didn't think Fuller would reply and was surprised to hear his voice so clear, so strident.'Something is planning to destroy us all. Something evil.'

It should have sounded stupid. It should have sounded corny but it didn't. The word, the last word hung around the cell like an echo.

'Something ?' asked the Doctor.

'Someone,' said Percival.'A man, that's all. Just a man.'

'Mr Fuller doesn't think so.'

'Mr Fuller is suffering from shock. The shock of discovering the body of a man he had spoken to only hours before.' Again, Sam sensed that Percival was talking to herself. Reciting a mantra, determined to interpret the situation in the only way she could accept it.'And if anything odd or supernatural is going on then it's you two turning up out of nowhere. I don't believe in the supernatural. Sowhat are you doing here ? Her voice contained just a tremor of desperation.

Sam looked at the Colony Chief Executive. All those years of planning and logistics and preparation and then this happens. She felt sorry. A bit sorry. Perhaps.

And the Doctor was ignoring her.

'How many deaths so far, Mr Fuller?'

'I asked you a question!' snapped Percival.

'Three. One last week. One three days ago. And Clark last night,' said Fuller. His voice had returned to its weary monotone.

'Where did they happen?'

'On the edge of the city. Western Sector. In the cellar of one of the unopened buildings there.'

At last, the Doctor sat up.'I think you need to let us out, Ms Percival,' he stated. 'I think that we can help you find whatever is murdering your colonists.'

'It's not whatever: it's a man. A man called Jake Leary.'

The Doctor took a deep breath. He seemed to be holding himself back. He was about to speak when Fuller interrupted. "That's no man. I don't know what it is but it's not human. I traced him to a tower block the night before last. He'd kidnapped a man called Lopez in a bar. When I went up to the apartment where they were hiding, I saw something. I don't know what I saw but... and then last night. Clark...' He closed his eyes, as if trying not to remember. When he opened them, Sam detected pleading in them.'We need help. What harm can it do?'

'No,' said Percival, emphatically.

Despite her promise earlier, Sam couldn't help herself. She found herself yelling again. 'What have you got tolose ? Why won't youlisten ?'

She turned in exasperation to the Doctor. Oddly, despite the naked cell bulb, his face was dark and shadowed. Only his eyes were glinting, as if they had sucked in all the surrounding light. Here we go, Sam thought, the old flimflam. How did he do this?

'You know,' the Doctor whispered, never dropping his gaze from Percival for a moment.'We really are rather good at this sort of thing. I think you will let us help you. Why don't we take a look at your colony Net?'

Chapter Five
Helen Percival

It was for the good of the Proxima 2 colony that the Doctor and Jones be kept away from the general populace as much as was humanly possible.

Helen Percival was convinced on this matter and her mind would not be changed. She already felt she had conceded some kind of point concerning the couple when she allowed them to work with Fuller on tracking down Jake Leary.

The decision to release the strange pair had undergone an odd blurring in her mind. She wasn't one for hasty and reckless action and she was disturbed that something had happened that she couldn't quite remember. The Doctor had shown her their credentials on the database, their identities as GMC Security Consultants with White clearance. That couldn't be argued with. It was just, well, there was something not right about it all. She felt as if she'd been the victim of some confidence trick and wasn't quite sure what had been taken from her.

She was going to take this matter much, much further. Helen checked once again the records of Leary's expedition. With power at a premium in the colony, many records were stored on paper, in filing cabinets. Hopelessly outdated, but Helen found the archaic practice reassuring. It was traditional and tradition was what kept the colony from descending into anarchy. That and discipline, if they were to remain pure.

Everything was there that was supposed to be there. Helen replaced the file and pushed the cabinet shut. That done, she buzzed for Morton.

He was in the door immediately, his face serious and ready for instructions.

'Yes, Helen?'

She took her place behind the desk. 'Those two new arrivals. Have you rechecked the GMC database?'

He nodded. "They're definitely GMC security consultants. Big guns. Recruited Albania 2127. "The Doctor", a.k.a. John Smith, seconded from the old UNIT peacekeeping force upon its disbandment. The girl, Samantha Jones, an alias, no real names attached to file,

a.k.a.Josephine Grant a.k.a. Sarah Jane Smith a.k.a. Ace and a list as long as your arm; they're all interchangeable. Graduated Geneva Corporate University 2124. That's it. Except for their shiny White security ratings.'

'Which means don't ask questions. On Earth. How did they get here so quickly?'

Horton shrugged. 'No idea. I suppose R&D must have been busy. That blue box, could be some kind of prototype.'

'Hmm.' Percival was not convinced. 'I don't believe it. I think there's something going on. Some directive on which I was not briefed. I suppose it's possible they stowed away on the ship, have been in hiding for three years and were activated by Fuller's signal.'

'If you don't mind me saying,' remarked Horton gingerly. "That sounds a bit far-fetched. Why would GMC do that?'

Despite his politeness, Horton's words stung. Could it be possiblehe knew something? That he was in on this stupid conspiracy? She'd better be careful. Change tack.

'Where are they now?' she asked,

'The Doctor went to investigate the Castanedes Tower. The girl, I think Fuller's briefing her on the case.'

Slowly, so as not to lose her clear thinking, Helen pointed a finger at her PA. 'Find them. Make sure you know where they are at all times. I need to know exactly what they're up to.'

Horton seemed about to say something when he changed his mind. Very wise. She wasn't Colony Exec for nothing. It was best for everyone when no one challenged her authority.

Horton turned and closed the door behind him.

Helen turned in her chair and began to flick through the CCTV cameras. Streets, buildings, the park, the spaceport. And, in the distance, the mountains.

She saw the mountains, their irregular sharp summits, as her personal

challenge. The territory she would tame. Apparently, some workers found the peaks disturbing, supernatural, oppressive. Not her. Nothing existed that could not be explained. Or controlled. It was all a question of willpower and discipline. The sooner she could dispel these stupid beliefs the better for all of them. They were here now - the planet would bend to their will.

Helen Percival held a military view of the colonisation of Proxima 2. She came from a long line of soldiers, right back to the British occupation of Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. There was an unbroken lineage of military breeding that ran through all the world's major campaigns: the Crimea, Spion Kop, the trenches of Flanders in World War One, Singapore in Two, Haifa in Three. The occupation of this planet continued that line. The only way to survive was to assume they were a military encampment under siege. The only difference was that, instead of a human enemy, the planet itself was the hostile force.

She remembered the stories read to her by her grandfather of Henry Percival, who fought in Afghanistan. Again, rocky perilous country, the construction of the fortifications carried out against terrible odds. Snow, cold, starvation, disease, conflict. The betrayal by the politicians that led to the retreat.

Well, no political wheeler-dealers were going to destroy this colony. As long as she kept a tight reign over the proceedings they would be ready for the second wave. And her place in history.

Which meant civilian morale must be tightly controlled. Which meant minimal disruption. Which meant keeping a close eye on the proceedings of this Doctor, Ms Jones and Mr Fuller.

The buzzer on her desk interrupted her daydream. She stabbed her finger down on to the sensor. 'Yes?'

'It's Horton here. Something you might want to know. Dr Rupinder has completed the autopsy on Clark. She's contacted Fuller with the results. Shall I intercept it for you?'

Helen thought for a second. With Fuller turned troublemaker it might be wise for her to take personal command of the investigations into Leary. She was beginning to suspect there was more this than met the eye. 'No,' she said. Tell Dr Rupinder I'll -'

Wait. Rupinder was a friend of Fuller's, wasn't she? Perhaps she too was... 'Horton?'

'Yes, ma'am?'

'Don't tell her anything. Don't let her know anything.' Again, that strange tone in Horton's voice. 'Very good. Is something wrong, Helen?'

'No,' said Helen, and she felt a cunning smile stretching her lips. 'I'll deal with the matter personally.'

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An hour after midday, she was called to the surface. A delegation of workers wanted to see her. This had never happened before.

Percival notified security and ordered a heavy armoured presence. Best to let them know that their entitlements ended in the park, the elevator a barrier they were not to cross. She liked to think she understood the workers' mentality. They respected power, they respected strength. Show no weakness. Give in to nothing.

She checked her hair and clicked shut her briefcase.

Up in the park, the workers were already causing trouble. Two security vans were circling them, video recording faces for documentation. A small group, led by that well-known troublemaker Marlowe, was throwing stones at the vans, trying to provoke the security team. Percival had total faith in de Winter, the Installation Security Chief. He was a lot less complex than Fuller, had more idea what his job was supposed to be. If the time came, de Winter could wipe out the whole pathetic demonstration.

Helen Percival emerged from the lift into the bright sunshine. It felt like an entrance, like in the theatre. Horton had wanted to come with her. She had refused. She didn't want to be seen needing anybody by her side.

The desired effect was achieved. The workers stopped tormenting the security vans and calmed themselves.

'What is the meaning of this nonsense?' she asked. Best to go in hard. Make the maximum impression immediately.

Marlowe and a bunch of his cronies made their way towards her. Percival was annoyed by the damage done to the park. The only damn patch of green on the whole planet and they'd already turned it into a dumping ground. More than a few of them were swigging from beer cans.

'Clark's dead,' said Marlowe simply, in his peasant African voice. He looked angry enough to kill. She tried to get the names of the others. All the usual suspects: Sun, Ballard, Lee.

'We're doing what we can,' she replied neutrally. "There's nothing to worry about. Leary will be caught.'

'Yeah?' cackled Marlowe. 'Well, it ain't enough. We need protection. Some people aksing themselves why we should go on working out here when that bastard's picking us off. Some people aksing why Clark?'

Percival nodded, then stared the big man down. 'What people? Names.'

Marlowe frowned. She saw one of the others place a restraining hand on his quivering arm. Lee, the little lopsided Chinese, said, 'It's not about that, ma'am. We don't feel safe, that's all. We want to work with you in catching him.'

'The best way you can help is to get on building the city. My people know their jobs. Let them do them. Or there'll be trouble.'

A great murmur rose from the crowd. Marlowe was having trouble restraining his temper. Trouble?' he snapped. 'You want trouble...'

Sensibly, Lee cut him off. 'Ms Percival. We just want him caught.'

Someone in the crowd threw a beer can. It landed with a crump on the lawn, aimed at her. She felt her mood blacken. 'Get back to work. This is your only warning.'

Marlowe pointed an accusing finger. 'You want this!' he bellowed. 'You want it to kick off!'

All right. Enough. "This conversation is terminated,' she said calmly. 'Leave the park.' Helen nodded at de Winter's helmeted figure atop one of the vans. She saw him raise the microphone to his face shield.'All

right people!'came a thick distorted South African accent. 'You have thirty seconds to break this up. Then we break it up for you.'

Two men were on Marlowe, pulling him back. Lee was pleading with her."This is stupid. There's no need!'

She felt a smile touch her lips. What a bunch of kids.'Get him -'she indicated Marlowe - 'cooled. Or I'll have you all arrested.'

The workers were uncertain now. They weren't moving but they clearly didn't want a fight. Another beer can was thrown, this time at one of the vans. It clanged off the side with a metal echo.

All right, thought Helen. It's about time you learned who was really in charge here. She raised an arm to signal de Winter.

A new voice broke up the meeting. 'Wait!'

It was Ben Fuller. Where the hell had he come from?

For the first time, Helen felt control slipping away. He was running from the elevator, that girl Jones in tow. Why had she let them out?

'Mr Fuller,' said Lee, obvious relief in his voice. 'You gotta stop this.' His little mouth, too full of teeth, was bouncing up and down in excitement.

Fuller looked pale and drawn. Annoyed, Helen wondered whether she could get Dr Rupinder to certify him unfit for his post. The girl was glaring at her. Stupid child.

'Do you want a riot?' Fuller asked. Helen realised he was talking to her.

'Mr Fuller, this isn't the place.' She nearly added: not in front of the workers.

'You're insane. Can't you see what you're doing? These people, your people, need your help and you're threatening them. What do you want?'

'I know what I'm doing.'

Fuller pushed her. Physically pushed her. She staggered a few paces, face burning with anger. 'Who the hell do you think you are?'

Fuller ignored her, turning instead to the delegation. 'You've got to go. If there's a fight now, you'll only get hurt.'

Marlowe finally pulled away from his restrainers.'You want fight? I give you fight!'

Helen actually felt a moment of admiration for Fuller, despite everything, as he interposed himself between her and the raging man. He slapped his arms against Marlowe. Perhaps shocked, Marlowe stopped in his tracks. 'I'm still the police chief here,' he said softly. 'And I'm telling you there will be no rioting. Not now. Not ever.'

Marlowe inclined his head towards Helen.'What 'bout her? She making this happen.'

'I'll sort it.We'll arrange a meeting, talk this through. It's the only way. Theonly way.'

They glared at each other, the English gentleman and the Nigerian native. At last, Marlowe turned, not even glancing at Helen. "This gonna be sorted soon,' he said casually.'One way or the other.'And to his men,'Come on. We got better things to do. Their mess, let them sort it.'

He pushed his way through the crowd, followed by his tramping colleagues. Within a minute, the men and women building Proxima City were gone. Helen stared out at the empty park. The security teams were standing down. She could see the disappointment on their faces as they unbuckled their helmets.

'This can't go on,' said Fuller. She realised he was speaking to her. Full of fury, she turned on him.

'You're right there, Fuller.You've crossed the line once too often...'

Inevitably, the Jones girl opened her mouth. Helen barely tolerated her voice, contempt bristling through her body. 'He just stopped your precious city getting itself ripped apart. You should be -'

'Really, Ms Jones,' she interrupted. 'Shall I get down on my knees here or inside? Mr Fuller, I let you out of your cell because I had to. Believe me, it will give me great pleasure to put you back in it. You interfere with my decision-making again and I will do more than arrest you. I will have you shot.'

Jones audibly gasped. Fuller was impassive. 'You just don't listen, do you?' said the girl. 'You've got no idea.'

'Sam,' said Fuller calmly. 'Leave it.'

'Very wise,' said Helen.'Now then.You have one use,Fuller. You're supposed to be the policeman. Find Leary and bring him in, dead or alive. Nothing else.'

Helen thought Jones was going to try something but Fuller put his arm round her and led her back to the elevator.

She caught de Winter's eye. He was looking angry and judgemental. She nodded to him.

If she'd learned one thing from this disgrace it was this. She really hated Benjamin Fuller. Whatever happened with Leary, she was going to get him out of the way.

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As the afternoon wore on, Helen Percival was still at her desk, her mind refusing to give up the rage that ate away at her concentration. She threw down the requisition orders she was supposed to be vetting.

She couldn't stop thinking about Fuller. About whether she had missed any signs of his treachery in the past. He had come with the highest recommendation. Ex-Euro Criminal Investigations Department. The only blips a highly publicised run in with Dutch Terrorists who had murdered his wife, which led to a serious but overcome drinking problem.

However, even then, back on Earth she had had her misgivings. He was a little too free and easy with his responsibilities, too quick to befriend those under him, untidy in appearance. And that thing with his wife. Surely there had to be some major psychological damage. Once a drunk...

She suspected him of being weak-willed when it came to the crunch. And, with a shock, she realised she had been proven right. It was his lack of endeavour that had enabled Leary to escape, and avoid detection. Perhaps it really was time for her to assume personal command of the manhunt. Start a thorough search. Give her the

opportunity to roust Seventh Avenue with its drunken degenerates. She had been slack, soft. Complacent. And that really wouldn't do.

However, there was still that nagging doubt. The Doctor. Was there really some kind of plot to disrupt the colony? Were they working to orders?

The thing was, despite the inconvenience and the delay to the work, Leary wasn't the worst thing that could have happened here. To have the workers terrorised, cowed, afraid... That polarised them towards the stiffening of order. In their panic they would welcome stricter measures and practices. Better than the other thing, the thing in Leary's report.

Also, Clark. The man had been a suspected union-mongerer. Installation Security had been monitoring his efforts to organise her workers for political purposes. Now he was out of the way.

Obviously, Leary had to be caught and executed. The workers and GMC would demand nothing less. More important than anything was that her record remain spotless when the second wave arrived. She must implement restrictive measures before he was caught. Give Fuller and his cronies the forty-eight hours you promised them, get the new restrictions into motion. If they found him, congratulations. If they didn't, well, bring the lot of them in. With the new powers she would be able to get the truth out of them about just what they were really up to. There would never be a better time.

The buzzer again. 'Percival.'

'Bad news, ma'am,' came Morton's voice. "They've lost the Doctor.'

'What?' Helen closed her eyes.'Where did he go?'

'He never reached West Eighteenth. Somehow he got away from the escort. Somewhere in the Central Sector.'

'Those idiots! Tell them to search. He's got to be found.'

'Ma'am.'

Helen leaned back in her padded chair. How could he get away? That bloody White clearance. No way could she have put him under armed guard as she had instinctively wanted to. It hadn't seemed worth

jeopardising her career. Now, however, he could be up to anything.

She felt panic. A feeling that everything was slipping out of her fingers, that she wasn't in command any more. That someone else was running the show. She walked over to her executive basin and began to wash her hands. She felt unclean. Soiled, as though someone had been in her apartment and run their dirty fingers through her clothing.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. A strong face. Centuries of good breeding. The family traditions of honour and leadership instilled in her for as long as she could remember.

She was older now but still dignified. The lines that were beginning to imprint themselves on her face were strong lines. She must never allow herself to slip.

What would be the best plan of action? She had already acted with maturity and decisiveness. She had identified a clear plan of action. The Doctor must be found and brought in, no matter what his rank. She would be firm - not threatening, just firm. He would tell her what he was up to. What his orders were. Surely GMC trusted her implicitly. She had never given them any cause for suspicion. Loyalty was in her blood.

Something in the eyes of her reflection broke her concentration. It seemed for a moment that beneath the strong, dark pupils there lurked something else. Someone else, from years ago.

What did it make her think of? Her cadetship, that was it. Westpoint Corporate Academy. Where GMC had supplanted the anachronistic USA national army. Global military training for business - the new cutting edge. Where Helen Percival had been inducted with the highest marks in any entrance examination for the new institution.

She recalled the years of training. The drill. The bull. The deliberate breaking down of selfish, self-indulgent ego. And she'd loved it. Despite the hardship, the physical punishment, the rigid unjust hierarchy, she knew she'd found her place.

Cadet Helen Percival had performed magnificently -naturally talented with a highly ordered mind. A brilliant head for facts, her economics lecturer had once said in praise of her. And an excellent administrator. A rewarding time. So why did she feel that something had gone wrong?

It could only be that final field exercise. Combat and tactical, phase three. Surely not. She'd long since realised she was totally correct in her decisions. Bad luck, that was all. Nothing she could have done.

It was a simple operation. An archaic infantry assault on a guarded fort. No tools, no technology, just a straight fight. The exercise was almost a ritual, a bit of fun to celebrate graduation.

She remembered her pride on receiving the orders for the command of Blue Team - the prized attacking force. The confidence she had inspired in her classmates when they learned she was in command, which increased when the news came in that Chung, an untidy, surly twenty-year-old, had been put in command of the fort. Chung was a Korean scholarship cadet Infamous for indiscipline and lack of respect towards his seniors. He had little sense of traditional tactics and was a lousy administrator.

She recalled the night in the woods, her troops mobilising for the attack. Her first action had been to line the younger cadets who would do the fighting on parade and inform them of the good news. It was night and Helen could remember the breath steaming out from her eager young fighters. Chung's Red Team ran at fifty-percent manpower compared with hers. Blue Team had never failed to take the fort in the five years the exercise had been running. This would be the most complete and memorable victory of them all.

There had been a prolonged check on the soldiers' equipage, strict penalties for those missing anything. Uniforms straight and smart. Paintguns in full working order. No slacking in her team. Confidence spilled out of the unit. Only old moaning Lawrence, the one subordinate she didn't like, interrupted the unity, suggesting that they commence the attack before daybreak. Telling her, the commander, that it was a mistake to commit the entire force to a frontal assault in broad daylight. She recalled dismissing him from her side, a real black mark for him, giving him the rearguard, the moppers-up, to deal with stragglers. She had no time for cowards.

And then it was morning, and time for the attack. Cadet Officer Percival had given the order to gather the soldiers ready to advance. She herself stood at the head of her little army, feeling ten feet tall with pride, and cried in the morning mist,'Victory is ours! This is a day that will be long remembered!'

She pointed theatrically at the fort. A great roar came up from the troops. With that, they charged. And were annihilated.

Quite against the spirit of the competition, Chung had spent the night getting his force to dig great trenches in front of the concrete fort. Disallowed tools, they had hacked the earth out with the butts of their paintguns. Percival later learned that the job had taken eight hours, while she had been parading her troops.

In the resulting charge, the first wave managed to get themselves held up trying to negotiate the trenches. Under the watching eyes of Red Team, crouching behind concrete walls, the second wave ran into the stalled vanguard. Very quickly, the field of battle was nothing but mud and slithering bodies. Only then did Red Team emerge and begin pounding them with the drugged paint darts. Helen's troops dropped like wheat under a scythe.

Back on the edge of the wood, she could see only that the attack seemed to have stopped. She had suddenly felt very, very sick. Clouds of paint were obscuring the writhing mass half a mile away.

'Oh my god,' said Cadet Akri, her second in command.'Get them back. Order the retreat.'

'No!' she remembered shouting. 'They're there. They can do it with force of numbers.'

Which was when a small squad of Chung's men, having smeared their armbands and infiltrated her troops in the charge, began firing into the third wave from behind.

It was a massacre. Her troops, having had no order but to take the fort, were wiped out. All of them. Some managed to reach the concrete walls before being blasted with paint. Many never even reached the trenches in front of the fort.

Only precipitate action by Cadet Lawrence saved the day for Blue Team. Chung had been fooled by the massive commitment to his strongest front. In his excitement, he urged his reserve troops on to the walls to finish Helen's troops off quickly. Lawrence managed to get his small rearguard squad round to the rear of the fort, dispose of the handful of troops there and liberate the red flag. The whistles blew.

Blue Team were the victors. Officially.

As the tranquillisers wore off and the downed troops were taken away, Helen remembered the looks from her staff officers. When Chung, his face streaming with sweat and paint, offered to shake hands she had walked away.

From the two hundred cadets of Blue Team, twelve remained 'alive', including her and her staff officers. Red Team casualties were practically nonexistent.

Although this incident failed to dent her otherwise spotless record (she succeeded in impressing upon the examiners that Chung had gone beyond 'acceptable initiative' by having troops obscure their colours), she had never forgotten the feeling she had had when she had seen the soldiers floundering in the mud. When she knew the situation had gone irrevocably, horribly wrong. It would never happen again. She had still won, after all; she had given Lawrence the task of managing the rearguard, hadn't she?

'Hmm,' she said into the mirror, back in the present day.

There were parallels here. Whatever part of her subconscious had forced that memory into her mind had done it for a reason. There was a connection. She must not allow herself to be outwitted again.

Review what needed doing. Think about the facts. Find the pattern.

The Doctor and Jones. They couldn't be here - but they were. They were here and here for a reason. To find Leary? No. Impossible. It simply couldn't be that they had appeared at just the right time just to solve their problem. There was definitely something else going on. And Fuller was involved, right up to his aristocratic neck. That could now safely, she reasoned, be considered a fact. Something that threatened her leadership. Had to be. Otherwise, according to logic, they would have told her what it was.

What would they do next? What would be their plan?

She would have to second-guess them all the way down the line. On her own. From now on she would trust nobody. It was time to start putting down one or two safeguards, ready for any prying or sneaking or subterfuge.

Yes, she would do that. And she would begin now, here in her office.

Helen Percival, Colony Exec, stood up and walked over to her heater unit.

Chapter Six
Rupinder

Night in a hospital is a very strange time. It feels like a prison, or a submarine. Despite the proximity of others sleeping just metres away there is a sense of isolation, of loneliness.

If anything, the sleepers intensify that sensation. Locked in their own dreamworlds they are somewhere else, somewhere entirely unreachable, their bodies shells left behind; remote and still, only the gentle waves of respiration signifying life.

All that remains are the lines of beds, the dark, echoing tiles on the floor and the empty spaces of the corridors. The impersonal medical machinery that stocks the wards seems altered, different, as if the dark creates new functions for their angular, complicated shapes. Limbs that bend unnaturally, wires and tubes ordered by some deranged, unknowable hand.

The wards become the world at night. And a strange alien world at that. A new intelligence reigns supreme.

Dr Maeve Rupinder traipsed through the wards to the mortuary wondering why she was thinking like this. It had to be Clark, she decided. The only other explanation was that she was tapping into a highly creative pattern of self-delusion that the psych-profilers back on Earth had missed. In other words, she was giving herself a bad case of the creeps.

Somebody was moaning. Not in this ward with its few occupied beds. Must be Phillipe, the accident victim, in intensive care. He was having a nightmare. Not surprising after a twenty-ton stanchion lands on your left leg.

Dr Rupinder marched smartly through the swing doors and into the pathology lab.

She was surprised to see Ben Fuller waiting for her. She felt her brown face blushing. It was so unexpected. Since they had been meeting about these murders, she had felt a warmth towards the Security Exec, a feeling she had not experienced since Rav had, well, gone. And, as she was a practical woman with a lot of responsibility in this medical wing,

she could not allow herself to feel such things.

'Maeve,' said Fuller. He looked pale and Rupinder wondered whether he really had done all those things he was accused of doing. Like having a nervous breakdown and activating the emergency beacon.

'Ben,' she replied, trying to keep her voice neutral. 'I heard thatder Führer had locked you up.'

'She may well again, after what happened earlier.' Rupinder frowned.'That disturbance in the park?'

He smiled. To her it looked false, stuck on.'And the inquiry team from Earth.'

For a moment, a horrible, sickening moment, Rupinder thought he had gone mad.'Inquiry team?'

Someone stepped out from the shadows at the back of the lab. A girl. Couldn't have been much more than twenty. Blonde hair. Old-fashioned T-shirt and combat trousers. Which was, of course, impossible. How could she be here? According to Rupinder's own medical files, no one in the colony was younger than twenty-five. Again, Rupinder reassured herself, it wasn't possible.

'He means me,' this impossible girl said brightly.

Rupinder wondered about the sudden pull on her heart. Towards the girl, towards Fuller. There was no reason for jealousy, surely. They were professional colleagues. Or was it that they looked like one of those ridiculous team-ups so fashionable in the Indo-Hollywood movies. The cop and the expert, bickering at first but by the end...

'I'm Sam,' said the girl.

Fuller was scratching his head, possibly trying to recall events clearly.''They came... in response to my signal. All the paperwork was in order, so Percival was satisfied. I think.'

The girl smiled at this. An odd, secretive smile.

'I see. And now. What do you want?' She directed the question at this Sam girl. Despite the Int-Am lessons, Rupinder was still finding herself

falling back into the old Gujarati speech patterns in times of stress.

'I want to see Clark's body. I want Sam to see exactly what happened.'

'Do you think that's wise, Ben? I mean, after the last time...'

'Just show us the body, Maeve. I don't need the psych-profile.'

She resisted the temptation to clasp his hand and tell him - no, plead with him - not to do this. For the sake of his health. Forget the girl, please.

Instead, she looked away and said,'All right.'

***

The drawer slid open with a hiss of inrushing air. Vacuum-sealed, to keep whatever was inside fresh.

Rupinder had felt strangely detached when she had performed the post-mortems on the first bodies. Her experiences in the rancid pit of Bombay had put paid to revulsion long ago, no matter how gory or rotten. No, it was more that they had been so...altered ... that they hadn't seemed like human cadavers at all. It was this alteration that had kept her from brooding about quite how Leary had done it to them.

'Nice,' said the girl Sam, wincing. Rupinder felt an entirely unreasonable flash of pleasure at her obvious shock. Perhaps she was going to vomit.

Fuller was hanging back, as if deciding whether he had the courage to face what was left of Clark again.

To Rupinder's surprise, Sam instantly overcame her shock. 'May I?' she asked as she began to unwrap the plastic membrane that covered Clark. Rupinder glanced at Fuller, who shrugged.

'Hmm,' said Sam, looking at the little white thing in the drawer.'I've never seen anything like it. What happened?'

'I don't know.' Despite herself, despite these annoying feelings about Ben, she found herself warming to the child. All right, she thought, let's see what you make of this.

'Massive exsanguination and some kind of traumatic dragging or suction of the epidermis,' she said, as if reading a list. 'Internal organs intact. Evidence of displacement due to same suction force. I'm trying to avoid jargon. I presume you're not a doctor.'

Sam smiled. 'No. Go on.'

"Thank you. As you can see, the facial features have been utterly erased. Not crushed, not cut, simply smoothed away.'

'How do you explain that?'

'I can't. It's as if someone just wiped them clean.'

Fuller snorted disbelievingly.'Leary.'

***

She made them coffee in the hospital refectory. It was important to get as far away from the cadaver as they possibly could. For reasons that Rupinder was only just beginning to understand, she felt that perhaps no one would be listening to them here.

She was trying too hard to diagnose her own mind. Who would be listening?

Sam declined the coffee. At least she declined it politely. This girl reminded Rupinder so much of herself at that age. So much to prove, so much to change. And always about yourself. Finding yourself, or discovering yourself. Euphemisms for look at me being serious, I'm all grown up now.

All the good works you did, all the principles you fought for, it was always about you. It became about others only when you grew up. And the third stage, if we are going to look at this clinically, she thought, was when you lost those others. And it became about you once more. Only this time, oh, how alone you had become.

Rupinder realised how much she missed young people. They had grown old so quickly here.

'Tell me about this bloke Leary,' Sam was asking as she pulled the cap from her bottle of refrigerated water.

Ben leaned back in his chair. 'He was... a geologist. Officially. Really, I just think he got himself qualified so he could go and explore and get himself into trouble.'

'I like the sound of him.'

Ben smiled. Just a little. Rupinder dammed the trickle of warmth that threatened to burst through her.'So did a lot of people,' he said. 'Unfortunately, not our beloved leader. She did everything she could to prevent him signing up for the colony ship. Only trouble was, he was just so damned good at his job. All she managed was to demote him to geological assistant. Under Professor Arnold Coors. A much more palatable choice for an exec.'

Rupinder recalled her own memories of Jake Leary. She remembered his medical just before going off on the survey. The man was so full of life. Odd, eccentric, even a little frightening, yes, but so refreshing after all the desperation and the boredom and the strain of being packed inside a metal sardine tin for two years. 'Jake was... well, he did not like to be tamed,' she said.

'So what turned him into a murderer?'

Rupinder felt her heart flutter. It felt as if a cold wind had run over her skin. She thought once again about Clark in the mortuary. Ben looked almost... mystical. "They... there was a survey mission. Him, Coors and some others. A second-stage geological survey of the mountain range surrounding the city.'

'And...?'

'And Leary killed them all. And then he came back and started killing people here.'

Ben stopped talking. Rupinder tried to catch his eye but he wasn't having any of it. Sam drummed her fingers on the table. She wanted more. 'And you just assumed he was the killer because of that? I don't believe it.'

'What would you like me to say?' snapped Ben.

Rupinder decided to help him out. 'He was found wandering in one of the quarries on the outskirts. They brought him to me. Leary was entirely

unresponsive. He had retreated deep inside himself. He had blood on him. Not his. Two hours later he lapsed into a catatonic state.'

'From which he later recovered and escaped from the Installation,' said Ben. 'And is now loose somewhere in Proxima City.' He was failing to keep the bitterness out of his voice. Did he really blame himself for the escape?

'And you think he murdered three colonists.' Sam was biting back. 'Really?'

'You know I don't think that,' said Ben.

Rupinder felt the conversation drifting away from her. 'What do you mean? If not him, who?' Dammit, the Gujarati kept slipping in, betraying her emotions.

'I have a little feeling that Percival knows more than she's telling,' said Sam, quietly.

'What do you mean?' asked Rupinder again, determined to find out what they had been hatching together. She looked at Ben for support but read nothing in his expression.

A feeling,' continued Sam. 'She was ready to hang you for setting off that signal that brought us here. She only let me and the Doctor go because he made her. And now, after this afternoon... she's hiding something. I'm sure of it.'

'Sam, what are you implying?'

Sam looked at her. She seemed very troubled.'I don't know. Listen, where would I find a report on the expedition? Leary's expedition.'

'Percival would have it somewhere in her office,' said Fuller. He seemed perturbed by Sam's question.'Why?'

A very attractive, naughty-little-girl smile broke out on Sam's face. It annoyed Rupinder, because it reminded her of little Sabby.'You know what we've got to do?'

'Not break into her office,' said Fuller. 'Don't say you're doing that. Because, after that thing in the park, we're on sufferance at best. She'll

arrest us the first opportunity we give her.'

'What else can we do? The Doctor is relying on me. And I think Percival is going to try to get us whatever we do. We have to act quickly.'

Ben thought.'All right,'he said without enthusiasm.'Let's do it:

Rupinder decided she didn't want to hear any more."That's not enough,' she insisted. "That's not nearly enough. It certainly doesn't give you the right to go rummaging through her office. Also, what if she comes looking for you? What do you want me to do, knock her on the head and put her in the cupboard?'

'No,' said Ben. 'Lie. Tell her we've gone off looking for Leary.'

'Now hold on a minute...'

And then he was reaching across for her, more quickly than she could have believed. Was he going to hit her? She felt his warm hands frantically squeezing her fingers. Despite herself, despite her determination never to get involved again with anyone, ever, she felt that old electricity pounding through her.

'Maeve,' he insisted. 'You've got to help us.'

She shook her head. 'Don't ask this of me. I have no intention of involving myself in Installation politics. The last thing this place needs is a conspiracy.'

'Why did she ask you to cremate the bodies of the other victims?'

'I don't know.'

'Why has she held on to the autopsy reports? How come nobody is allowed access to them?'

'I don't know!'

She blushed under Sam's hard stare. 'You're afraid of her,' this... child said accusingly.

Rupinder jumped as Ben thumped the table. The cups rattled. With difficulty, he managed to get himself under control.'Maeve. Don't you

understand? She doesn't want this solving. We need your help. Before it's too late.'

'Too late?' she found herself whispering.

'Before whatever is alive out there in the city kills us all.'

Rupinder tried to think. She had to say something, do something to keep them all out of trouble. But what? Overhead, in the grid, a single strip light was flashing, hoarsely trying to get itself working. Its angry buzz fizzed round the refectory. The air was still. No sound but that buzz. Night-time in a hospital.

Just what was she was getting herself into?

***

So, that was it. She was involved in a conspiracy whether she wanted it or not. Because of Ben Fuller. A police chief on the verge of a serious mental collapse.

Rupinder stretched out and yawned. This was only the first night shift of three. She looked at her office clock. The illuminated LCD told her it was the middle of the Proximan night. Nights that were getting longer.

It was this planet. For all the efforts of the great GMC and its boasting, what were they here? When the airships were sailing round India with their big recruitment campaign they boasted of the new Earth, the new home that would be the first step to the stars. The final frontier, they called it. The glory that awaited.

She thought of Rav laughing at their pomposities, with little Sabby, before the... the fire. One little colony. The first Earth-like world. Why would anyone out there want us to go and mess it up for them? Couldn't they see the damage we'd done to our own? Why would God allow that? And then of course Rav and Sabby had burned to death, and she had signed up after all. She was one of the glorious few. Glorious. Ironic.

She remembered that Leary was a Martian. Born on the colony. Not from Earth at all. Space children, they called them. Probably accounted for his roaming spirit. Or was it now a Roaming Spirit? She'd heard the rumours, even down here among the casualties of the brave new world.

What would Leary be doing now? Hiding in some basement somewhere? Was he sleeping? Was he troubled by the dreams that affected so many of the colonists, or was his mind completely fragmented? She hoped she never found out.

'Busy night?'

Rupinder jumped.

It was her.

She turned in her chair to see the Chief Exec, still dressed in her severe suit, standing in the office doorway. 'I'm sorry,' she blustered, 'you made me jump.'

'Did I?' Percival was cold, no emotion.'What did Fuller and the girl want with you?'

Rupinder felt herself blushing again. She tried to will the blood from her face. Her hands were shaking. 'What do you mean?' No. That was terrible.

Percival was still, framed in the doorway. 'You know what I mean.'

Rupinder turned back to her desk, as if some clue might be found in the scraps of paper lying there. 'He... he wanted to talk about how stressed out he was feeling.' Ah! Pathetic.

She heard a brief flash of clacking heels on the tiles, then Percival was swinging her round. Rupinder blinked as the woman put her face right up to hers.'Don't lie to me. What did you talk about?'

Percival's stare was relentless, ruthless. Rupinder was hot, couldn't think properly. She now knew what Ben had meant about their leader's intransigence. Something in her eyes, some need.

'You only get one more chance,' said Percival, still utterly calm. 'What did you discuss in your cosy little chat in the refectory?'

There had to be something, some information she could give out.'Leary. They wanted to know about his mental state when he came back from the survey.'

Still that gaze. 'Why?'

'I don't know. I promise you I don't. They said you'd given them forty-eight hours to find him.'

At last, Percival released her. She stood erect, looking past Rupinder, scheming. 'I know I did. Can't quite remember... that man, the Doctor. He had credentials...'

The break gave Rupinder time to gather her thoughts. Would it be safe to give out a little more? To show willing? 'They were interested in the survey records. The girl, Sam, she wanted to see them.' Immediately, she cursed. What had she done?

Percival re-entered the real world. A humourless smile touched her red lips.'Did she now? Good. I think we can be of service there.'

As Rupinder looked up, Percival composed her corporate-exec image once more. "Thank you, Dr Rupinder.You've been most helpful. Now, I want you to chat with Fuller some more, when you get the time. And I want you to tell me everything about it. Good night.'

With that, she turned and marched purposefully away. The door to her office swung slowly shut on its spring. Rupinder let out a deep breath. She would have to worry later about how much she had given away. Right now, the patients needed checking and she had to stop her hands trembling.

***

The call came just before dawn, when she was just getting ready to return to her apartment. Paramedics had been called to a disturbance on the outer ring road. A man had collapsed on the tarmac. He was in shock, completely deranged.

Thankful for something that would stop her brooding, Rupinder woke her nursing assistants and prepped the casualty monitors. When the man arrived, an American Chinese, his face was utterly pale. Tattooed oriental snakes, the marks of the San Francisco street gangs, slithered down his moist arms.

They helped him on to the bed. His body was completely limp, mouth moving soundlessly, eyes wide and terrified.

He seemed to be trying to say something. Rupinder looked for signs of physical injury. Nothing but a handful of cuts and bruises. Probably from falling on to the road.

'What's his name?' Rupinder asked the paramedic.

'Sun, I think,' came the reply.'One of Clark's men.'

She bent towards his face. There was an electronic hiss as the med unit punctured his arm to introduce the relaxant into his body. 'Sun,' whispered Rupinder. 'Can you hear me?' The man did not react to her voice.'Sun.'

She held his hand. Immediately, he gripped her hard, as if clinging to a life belt.'Sun!' she hissed, louder.

Sun paused. His mouth quivered, sending his wispy beard shaking. Rupinder smelled sweat and alcohol. She tried again.'What happened? What did you see?'

The man seemed to be looking into the distance. Seeing something.

'I saw him...' he moaned. 'I saw him...'

'Who?' asked Rupinder. The man was spooking her. 'Who did you see?'

At last, Sun rolled his eyes to stare straight at her. 'Leary. I saw Leary. He killed my friend...'

Chapter Seven
Marlowe and Sun

Marlowe had come up with the plan and he had agreed. It must have been the beer. Otherwise, no way would he have allowed himself to do something so stupid. It wasn't as if he didn't know.

It was after that stupid pointless meeting with Percival. Something had become unhinged in Marlowe's brain. Sun wished that Clark was still here, you knew where you were with him. He was reliable. It did seem very, very suspicious that this Leary just happened to tag the one guy who was getting the worksters organised. He had liked Clark, he had been a compadre .

Whereas Marlowe was voodoo. He was black magic.

'Goddamn execs. Treat us like we nothing. You know what we gotta do,' were the first words that hinted at the trouble. Sun was draining the last of the cheap GMC beer that everyone suspected was deliberately thin. It certainly didn't taste like anything back in Frix.

'Get another one o' these?' Sun replied. He was bleary and tired after a days pounding that concrete crap into its moulds.

Marlowe sneered, his gold tooth glinting in the dim bar light. Sun snorted a laugh back before he realised. He'd just made a joke, in front of Marlowe, who was not exactly known for his sense of humour. Someone had fired up the juke. The King belting out 'In the Ghetto'.

'What should we do?'he asked, quickly, to deflect potential trouble.

'I gotta aks you,' Marlowe rattled on, '

'bout Clark. He was our friend and now he's dead.'

Uh oh. He was getting tearful. 'Damn shame,' Sun said, trying to throw some water on these coals.'There's gonna be trouble. No one wants to work any more. They just want to findhim . Execs got a big shock coming. Shame.'

'Damn shame,' drawled Marlowe. 'So what we doin' about it? About that maniac that tagged him?'

Sun thought for a minute. 'What do you mean?'

'He'd've done it for us. He was our man. Not those... peasants -' and here he vaguely gestured towards the Installation - 'in their little hole. An' certainly not Chief of Police Benjamin Fuller. The execs. They glad he's dead. They probably behind it.'

Well done, thought Sun, you got there in the end. What every other workster's been thinking since last night. And you're our new leader?

Nothing was stopping Marlowe now. Sweat poured from his neon-tinted ebony skin. He was fingering his dripping beer bottle.'It's family, man. You hurt our family. We take revenge.'

Now Sun knew what this idiot was going to do. No, Sun. You don't need to be a part of this. 'We talkin' about Leary?' he asked.

A big black finger jabbed him on the forehead. 'Hey, wake up. Who the hell do you think we talking about? We gotta be the cops. Ain't no one else go'n do it for us.We gotta find that son of a bitch and rip him apart.'

Sun stared into the bottom of his empty bottle. This must not be allowed to go further.

'You comin' or what, man?' asked the Nigerian giant.

And that was that.

And now, as they staggered towards some building out in West, Sun found himself pondering on the differential between the size of Marlowe's body and the intelligence that lived within it.

He had already shown Sun the home-made gun. Already that made Sun an accomplice in some righteous law-breaking.Der Führer would murder them for that.

'Ah come on. Let's get back to the bar.'

Marlowe turned on him viciously. Under the streetlight he seemed even bigger. There was definitely something crazy about him. He remembered the rumour that he'd dodged the rap-sheet checks and had killed a man. Come to Proxima to get away from the African law.

Sun realised he wasn't being given the option to back out.

'What the hell are we gonna find anyway?' he asked, desperate for one last get-out clause. "There ain't gonna be nothing there.'

The Nigerian grinned. 'Yah. And maybe there is.'

"The loon? No way. This is a bad idea.'

'Shut up .You follow.' He carried on walking, beckoning Sun with the pistol.'Someone's gotta pay for Clark.'

Sun followed.

The building was completely quiet. Sun suddenly felt cold. He was remembering the time he had been cornered by the Talons down in old Frisco. The shadows gliding through the dark, the steel glinting. It was that kind of cold. 'Isn't this exactly what got him wasted?' Sun tried again, as they wandered the lobby looking for clues.'This is insane.'

He stopped. A whole deckful of footprints led down into a basement. The number was stencilled on the stairwell door.

'No way, man,' he hissed. 'You can kill me if you like but I ain't going down there.'

Marlowe was already pushing the stairwell door open. Sun could see nothing but the dark. Marlowe turned and glared at him. 'You're a disgrace, man. Coward.'

'I don't care. I got a stinking headache from all that beer and I'm scared out of my tree.You go on if you want.' He tried to calm the other man down. 'I'll wait for you. I swear.'

The glare did not let up. Marlowe spat on to the floor in front of his feet. Then he turned and disappeared into the dark.

Sun tried to stand still. The door was there, waiting for him. To back up his pal. Come on, it seemed to say, I dare you.

It was stupid. Three men had been killed down there. OK, they weren't supposed to know that; God knew how Marlowe had found out. Probably

from Clark's girlfriend, the one who hadn't come to work this morning. But they did know. Which didn't automatically mean that you had to go there. What ifhe was there?

Sun had never met Jake Leary. Maybe he should have. Maybe then he'd have had more of an idea about him rather than the nightmarish giant the others had turned him into. Sun's perception of him was of a wild-haired maniac, wielding that machete, perhaps even wearing a mask. That he'd gone inside the mountain and the spirits that lived there had taken him over. The rumours were rife and diverse in their imagination. At this moment, Sun believed all of them.

There was no noise from the basement.'Marlowe?'he said. His voice trembled. How would he have heard that? You're acting like a little girl.

He took a step forward. It's just a basement, that's all. This is the twenty-second century. We've got rid of being scared of the dark.

He heard a noise from below. A box or something falling, a long way away. It made him jump. Then he heard Marlowe curse. He must have knocked something over.

Sun kept walking towards the basement door, trying to swallow his fear. Marlowe was coming back up the stairs. He heard the heavy footsteps. Let that be an end to it, Sun thought. You're drunk, Marlowe, and you've done what you said you'd do. There ain't nothing there. I'll buy you a drink.

He reached the door just as it opened. 'Marlowe,' Sun said, relieved. 'Let's get out of here.'

It was Clark. It was Luiz Clark, Sun's dead friend, standing in the doorway, his mouth wide and smiling, his eyes twinkling with conspiracy. 'Hello, Sun,' he said in a whisper.

Sun found himself walking backwards, his hair bristling in fright.

'You're dead, Clark,' he said, his voice forced through an icy throat.

Clark shook his head. 'It was a trick. Percival wanted me out of the way, so we faked it, me and Marlowe.'

That wasn't right, Sun thought. Marlowe would have told him, wouldn't

he? Wouldn't he? He thought how angry Marlowe had been in the bar. Was it really all acting?

'Come on,' said Clark.'We've got work to do.We've decided to let you in on it.'

Sun stopped walking. It was him, right down to that permanently sweat-stained moustache. There was nothing odd about Clark, nothing.'What's going on?' he asked.

'Marlowe knows. He's down there.'

Sun had the feeling Clark would do anything to get him into the cellar. He had never been so scared in his life.'What about Leary?' he asked, feeling his willpower draining away. The questions helped him think.'Whose body did they bring out of there?'

Clark seemed faintly displeased with him, as if he was too important to bother with these farcical interrogations. Sun, for the first time, detected a change in the old foreman. Clark had always been patient with his fellow workers. Had been famous for it.

'You'll see everything, Sun. I promise. It's wonderful, it really is. Like a miracle. Marlowe will show you.'

He shouldn't go, he really shouldn't. But there was no getting away from it. This was Clark. And it wasn't such a crazy idea that they should fake his death: Percivalwas clearly halfway to doing something to put them all down.

'I won't force you,' said Clark. 'Just promise not to tell anyone. I know I can trust you.'

Sun looked at the floor. He hated to say it but, 'OK, man. This is freaky, real freaky.' Ignore that voice from a thousand gore-vids and snuff-tapes that said, 'Bad idea. Bad idea...'

Clark smiled again. He pushed the stairwell door fully open. Sun walked. 'Hey Marlowe!' he yelled. 'Why din't you tell me?'

It was real dark in the stairwell as he followed Clark down. The old man looked better for his death: his movements were somehow, well, more graceful. Sun found he had to squint to keep his footing.

At last, a green light from below tinged Clark's outline and Sun could see again. The stairs led into a long corridor full of pipes and hanging bundles of cable. Clark stepped aside as Sun shuffled off the steps. 'Up there,' he said.

Sun looked ahead. There was nothing there. Just the corridor leading away. And something on the ground. Marlowe's pistol, half hidden in a crack in the paving slabs. He bent to pick it up. He saw something slumped in a bundle, further along the corridor. 'What's this?'

Oh Jesus.

'Marlowe,' came a voice.'He saw it. Beauty. Real perfection. A beauty timeless and terrible and absolute. No wonder he couldn't take it. It must have made him feel so small. You'll get it. Soon.'

Sun turned.

Clark was gone. Jake Leary was smiling warmly through his dark, matted, overgrown hair, In one hand he held the machete.'Hello, Mr Sun. I thought it was time we met.'

This time Sun didn't bury the scream. Without thinking, he turned and fired Marlowe's gun straight into Leary's midriff. A sound, perhaps a snarl of pain, erupted from the dark man's mouth. Oh god, just let me get through this, I'll do anything. Just let me live.

He bolted and then was in the stairwell and up and out and running, running and running.

It was only when he reached the outer ring road and the stitch in his side couldn't be ignored any longer that he even remembered who he was.

Chapter Eight
Joan Belts

She was in her hut eating breakfast when he walked straight in and introduced himself. 'I'm the Doctor,' he said cheerily. 'Joan Betts, I presume.'

She couldn't help herself, she had to admit she was... there was no other word for it but astonished. She realised her mouth was opening and closing in surprise. A dollop of the synthesised oat muck they gave them for breakfast sat browning on the end of her spoon.

It was as if some Victorian botanist had walked in from a morning's constitutional in the garden: flowing hair, velvet coat, cravat, everything. I bet Percival really loves you, she thought.

When she realised that, Joan Betts knew she was going to like him.

'What do you want?' she asked, not knowing whether to be irritated or amused.

'I was told you could show me where the native Proximans live,' he explained, full of energy and vigour. God, he made her feel her fifty years. Handsome though, in an unsettling way. He didn't look that young. But cetainly not old.

'Why exactly do you wish to visit the native nest, Doctor Whoever-you-are?'

He grinned.'Because I'm interested. Oh, it's just Doctor, by the way.'

It was when he had begun fiddling with her recording equipment that confirmation was complete. He was going to be impossible. 'Do you mind leaving that alone? It's very delicate. And complicated.'

The smile got even wider, and he didn't put it down. 'Oh I don't think so. Electronic notepad with built-in visual recording facility. Just the job for on-the-spot xenoanthropological reporting. Only I see you're having a little trouble with your text/image aligner.'

'I beg your pardon? Be careful. That's a precision instrument. The only one on the colony.'

To her astonishment, and panic, he flipped the casing open on the plastic box without unlocking the magnetic seal and was flicking one of the circuits inside. 'There. It shouldn't give you any more trouble.'With that, he threw the notepad into her reaching hands.

Carefully, Joan placed it on the workbench.

When she turned back, he had already sat down and was spooning the breakfast into his mouth. 'You had finished, hadn't you?' he asked politely. 'I haven't eaten for eighty years.' All right then, thought Joan, a mad Victorian botanist.'Feel free,' she said, stunned. She found herself starting to laugh. Something she hadn't done in a long time. Pulling up a cane chair, she sat herself down next to him. 'Why are you interested in the natives? I take it you're not one of our erstwhile construction engineers.'

The Doctor (and it was odd just how suited he seemed to that title) put down the spoon and dabbed his mouth on a little napkin that somehow appeared from his jacket pocket. 'No, I'm new,' he said. 'I'm kind of from Earth...'

'Which means?'

'I'm not really sure. Pay it no mind. As for the natives, you see, when my companion and I... Her name's Sam by the way, blonde girl, very nice, I'm sure you'll like her when you meet her. When we first arrived on this planet we met one of these natives. Charming fellow. I thought I'd have a little chat to see what they can tell me.'

'Tell you? Tell you what?'

He leaned back in the chair and put his booted feet up on the workbench. He appeared to be reminiscing. 'Joan Betts. Professor Joan Betts.' He snapped his fingers and pointed at her.'I've read your book!'

Joan frowned.'When?'

'Five years' time. Comparative psychology and culture... Sea Devils!'

'What?'

'I love xenoanthropology: a sprinkling of speculation, a dash of biology

and a pinch of psychology.'

'Look, Doctor...'

'Brilliant. Pick 'n' mix. Just like me. I knew we'd get on as soon as I read your file.'

'Doctor!' She rarely raised her voice but his flippancy towards her life's work warranted it. She was irritated but, as soon as he smiled again, it just went.

'Yes?'

She started to say something, about how you couldn't call them Sea Devils any more, then changed her mind. 'Why do you want to speak to the Proximans?'

'Becausejoan... May I call you Joan? It strikes me that they probably know a lot more about this planet than you do. And if I'm going to catch this vicious psychopathic killer Leary I'm going to need their help.'

She barely heard him. Suddenly, this Doctor was a very, very threatening presence. All that patter, it was a screen.Joan had the feeling he already knew what he was looking for.

'I know it's a terrible inconvenience,' he gabbled on,'but, if you would be so kind as to take me there, I really would be awfully grateful.'

She fixed a smile on to her face. 'Of course, Doctor. Of course I'll take you there. What time shall we say?'

"There's no time like the present,' he replied, evenly. Again, Joan had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew something. 'As long as that's convenient, of course.'

She looked at him hard. She thought she had the reputation as the colony eccentric.

They had given her nicknames because of her tropical clothes and grey hair.Sigourney , after that woman who lived with the gorillas back in the twentieth century. A crabby old woman. Untidy, unfathomable. But it was as if this Doctor already knew her inside out, knew just what to say to make her laugh, to get her to do what he wanted. She found herself

attracted to him, the way she had been attracted to Jake in those first months. He was dangerous.

He stood in front of her, patiently, as if expecting to be examined.

'All right...' she blustered, 'let me find my kit.' She began rummaging around the untidy quarters, overturning bundles, paper, equipment.

'Is this what you're looking for?' asked the Doctor.

Joan turned, running a hand through her untidy hair. He was holding out her rucksack, as if he'd known where it was all the time. His blue eyes really were incredible.

"Thanks. Thank you,' she said. 'H-how did you know?'

'Luck. After you,' he stated, as if butter wouldn't melt.

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Joan led the Doctor out into the main nesting area in Central. When they had first landed, the little rock circle had been the only landmark in the flat plain that linked the mountains to the ocean. To her delight, Joan had discovered that the boulders were piled round an open centre full of bolt holes for the native Proximans.

Percival hadn't been quite so pleased. The rock circle was smack in the middle of a planned service road. Joan had managed to prevent the order to knock the whole thing down but had had to compromise by having a flyover constructed over the Proximans' heads. She felt more than uneasy about the compromise but with Percival any result at all was a triumph.

'Not quite what I expected!' shouted the Doctor as he followed her, half walking, half sliding, down the earthy embankment walls. Over their heads, the wagons were making the ground vibrate.'It's hardly a nature reserve.'

'The Proximans didn't seem to mind. In fact, I rather think they were quite excited by all the noise. Anyway, they sleep mostly in the day. When there's less traffic.'

Joan helped him down to the base. The rock ring squatted in front of

them, the broken boulders heaped on top of one another as if dropped there by a giant. The Doctor began brushing the dust from his jacket.'You said they didn't seem to mind.'

He produced a pair of very old-fashioned sunglasses, orange-tinted, and arranged them over his eyes before taking in the rock circle.

'Yes,' said Joan. "The numbers seem to be dwindling. I've been trying to find out why.'

'Have you asked them?'

Joan smiled. "They don't really speak, Doctor. Not in any meaningful way. They remember, they repeat, they imitate. And that's about all they do.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I've never even seen them eat. As far as I can tell there is no food chain on this planet. In fact, there is no other life form at all.'

The Doctor seemed fascinated by the mass of broken boulders. They always reminded Joan of a pile of giant brown molars. 'I wonder...' he said cryptically.

'What do you wonder?'

He turned to Joan. 'Well, if they're the only species on Proxima 2...'

'Yes?'

'Who did they imitate before the humans got here?'

Joan frowned. What sort of question was that?

He was off again, striding towards the nest. 'Come on. You've got so much to teach me.'

She led the way over the rocks. Very quickly, as she knew they would be, they were spotted. It was the big, bold one, the one with the strange pink weals in its fur. She called it Cheeky Monkey. As Joan hauled herself towards the lip of the circle, it bobbed its head up and began studying her.

'Joan,' it said.

'Hello, Cheeky Monkey. How are you today?'

'How are you today?" replied the Proximan and stuck out his tongue.

The Doctor was laughing as he reached them. 'Cheeky Monkey?'

Joan shrugged. 'The first thing he did was stick out his tongue.'

Cheeky Monkey laughed. 'Very dignified,' said the Doctor.

When they had climbed into the clearing inside the rock circle, Cheeky Monkey bounding ahead, Joan made sure she observed the Doctor's reaction to the nest. The bare exterior gave no clue as to the riches within. The Proximans were thieves. They had stolen all sorts of building materials, bundles of wire, discarded tools and piled them into strange organic shapes. Joan sometimes wondered whether they were trying to mimic the work that went on around them, trying to make sense of the odd to-ing and fro-ing of their new neighbours.

The Doctor darted about, looking down into the bolt holes, examining the junk sculptures and the murals painted on to the rocks, perhaps trying to find meaning in the whole unholy mess. What are you really doing here, Doctor? she thought.

When he had finished, he returned to Joan.

'I'm amazed that you were permitted to infiltrate their culture so thoroughly. I was under the impression that you alien anthropologists did nothing but observe.'

'In case we alter their evolutionary and technological development?' Joan said mock-sardonically. 'Noninterference? It's a nice idea but a bit old-fashioned.'

The Doctor gave her a funny look. 'Really?'

'In any case.We couldn't really help it. They all came out to watch our colony ship land. They've been interacting with us ever since. I didn't think we'd made any real difference to their culture.'

Apart from building a city over their house, you mean?'

'That's got nothing to do with me.'

The Doctor was studying the patterns on the rocks. 'But something is happening. The numbers are dwindling, so you said.'

I don't want to answer that, she thought to herself. I'm the only person on the planet that knows or cares about this. Of course something is happening. But it's not what you and all the others think.

By now, one or two of the other adult Proximans were emerging from their holes to come and look at the strangers. Joan had visited them enough to be able to identify individuals. The one with the scar over the eye she had nicknamed Beauty, the little excitable one she called Alfie, the reticent one Roo. They sat up on their haunches, staring intently at her and the Doctor. By now she was used to their gazing, and getting used to the mimicking. She knew the others in the colony found the Proximan impressionists disturbing. One had told her it was like being surrounded by distorting funhouse mirrors. And once they started it was extremely difficult to get them to stop.

'Why do you think they do this?' asked the Doctor, putting a hand over his brow, augmenting the protection of the sunglasses. Immediately, all four Proximans copied his movements. 'Why do you think they do this?' they said in unison.

Joan held back a laugh as she watched them all saluting each other. She took a step forward and immediately the eyes were back on her. There was relief, as she realised the Doctor seemed perturbed by this treatment. Perhaps she could gain some advantage from his unease.

'I think the mimicry is the result of some very old natural defence mechanism. I've got a feeling that this Proximan species is a degenerated remnant of a much more complex being.'

Let them get their tongues round that, she thought, challenging the creatures' stares. She noticed the Doctor observing intently as they ran through a gamut of crushed vowels and consonants in variable pitches, all of which vaguely resembled her complex sentences.

'Not just physical,' said the Doctor. 'I think they're telepathic.'

Joan reacted as if he'd told her she was going home on the next flight.'How could you possibly -' She stopped herself. He must have read her notebook. Must have. She tried to rephrase her question. 'How long have you been studying them?'

He was back looking at the patterns again. With his back to her he replied dismissively, 'Just a few minutes. It's not a particularly profound observation. The way they anticipate, response speeds, that kind of thing. Logical really.'

Logical? It had taken her eight months to evenconceive of the notion that they could read thoughts. 'I think you're being immodest, Doctor.'

Joan couldn't stop herself liking him. His precociousness. His enthusiasm. She had been doing this a long time on her own. She thought of the results they could achieve in a study of the Proximans. Together they could revolutionise xeno-anthropology. A semi-intelligent telepathic species of social animals. Even Percival wouldn't be able to stifle that one.

And then Joan remembered her secret and the dream went away. It was another trick, trying to get her to trust him.

The Proximans were jumping around now, the unity temporarily dissipated. They were approaching the humans, stroking and studying.

'Tell me about these patterns,' he said, indicating the rock scrawls. He waited with a patient smile for the chorus of echoes to die down.

'Me or them?' asked Joan.

'You,' he said evenly.

All right, thought Joan. Let's see how good you really are. She strolled over to him and squatted down. She indicated a series of circular line-patterns.

'I've been studying these for years. One of the first things I did when I arrived was record the marks. I've cross-matched them on the database but, not surprisingly, they don't relate to any human cave-painting sequences.'

Cheeky Monkey, always the boldest, jumped up on to the boulder they

were investigating. The Doctor returned the unblinking gaze as he talked. 'Highly complex abstract images. Could be a focal mark. The inward progression of the circles would suggest that possibility.'

'Focal mark?'

'A clever scientific term I've just made up. Think of the clock or flame that might be used to concentrate the mind of a subject undergoing hypnosis. Perhaps these patterns concentrate the telepathic focus of the Proximans. They may even have some telepathic resonance, a symbol undetectable to the human subconscious. I thought I could feel my ears twitching.'

Joan thought about what he had said. After a second, she gave her considered opinion.

'That is the most ill-informed, speculative twaddle I've ever heard.'

'Twaddle,' echoed Cheeky Monkey.

'Oh, that's your opinion, is it?' snapped the Doctor at the little creature.'Or are you hiding something?'

'Hiding something.'

'I thought so.'

Joan just didn't know what the Doctor wanted. What did he hope to gain from all this? For a second, she wondered whether she was being overly paranoid. His efforts to decipher these scratchings were so fanciful as to be ridiculous. If he was making some kind of subtle play to draw out what she knew about Leary then its machinations were completely beyond her. His behaviour wasn't making any sense.

The Doctor had stood up now and was looking around him, tracing the outline of the Proximan nest. 'You can just see the mountain range.' He pointed west where the immense fangs of summits towered into the sky.

'I don't see the relevance, Doctor.'

'Look at the markings.'

Patiently, Joan looked at the Proximan patterns. Yes, they were still the

same. The densely packed white circles scratched into the boulders, inked in concentrated white dust.'What am I seeing?'

'Don't you think it's interesting that they all face the mountain range.'

'Interesting, yes. Relevant? Tell me.'

'Turn around,' said the Doctor. Joan had the distinct impression that she was being patronised. He led her to the eastern side of the nest. The creatures, now getting the hang of the Doctor's movements, swarmed around him.

'Look at these markings.'

"They're different. I did know that, Doctor.'

She looked at these patterns, trying to second-guess his hypothesis. Here, the Proximans had scratched and inked more baroque shapes. Still circles, but lots of them superimposed upon one another, slightly overlapping. And lines emerging from them, like a child's painting of the sun. 'The Proximan stars?' she asked. 'That was my original thought too. Doctor, this is old.'

'Bear with me,' he insisted. 'Why such a spatial difference? The position of the sun? Some kind of sundial?' Before she could speak he overrode her. 'I don't think so either. Now, let's assume that I'm correct in thinking that these first marks we looked at were telepathic focusing aids...'

'No.'

'Please, Joan. Let's pretend. Why only here, facing in this direction? Assuming it's not to do with entertainment or fancy, it must be because they needed to. They needed, at least in a symbolic sense, to concentrate their telepathic energies towards the mountain range. Are you with me?'

Joan sniffed. 'We're still playing let's pretend, aren't we?'

'If you like. So what do you think these other sets of patterns represent? Something that doesn't need to face the mountains.'

She was completely lost. This went against all the ascribed codes of research: dreaming up a wild hypothesis on the flimsiest of speculative

evidence. 'What do you think?' she asked.

The Doctor sat down cross-legged on the dusty ground, facing west. The Proximans swarmed round him, copying him like enthusiastic children. 'I don't know,' he whispered. 'But I'm really tempted to find out.'

So that was it, Joan thought with relief. He had lost his mind. 'All right, Doctor. Good luck. I tell you what: I'll leave you to commune with the rocks while I return to my anthropological surveying, boring as it must seem to you. I'll try not to disturb you.'

The Doctor laughed, with good humour. He kept his eyes fixed on one of the patterns. "That's a real shame, Joan, because I thought you'd be interested in finding out what really happened to your friend Mr Leary.'

Joan stopped still. Keep yourself calm, she thought. Don't give anything away. She had been right about him. 'What do you mean?'

'I said I didn't know what those other pictures represent. However, I'm getting a nasty suspicion.'

'Which is?'

His eyes never left the pattern. His voice was dropping into a monotone. The Proximans hummed along with him, making quite a little chorus. 'I think they used this to ward off something in the mountains. And those pictures over was they were trying to ward off. These patterns are a warning.'

His eyes glazed over.

***

She climbed on to the lip of the nest to wait and see what happened.

The Doctor was still down on the ground staring at the patterns, his retinue faithfully copying his lack of action. At least they'd stopped humming.

Despite her scepticism, his explanation as to the nature of the scrawls on the rocks was at least some kind of answer. She had spent months trying to find out what they meant. Had he been sent by Percival to shake her up? He had given her a fright about Leary.

God, she was getting old. Her brain felt worn out; all these weeks of stress and strain were taking their toll. Even if he was an enemy, and she didn't really believe that any more, he had come as a welcome relief to the nowhere she was getting in her studies. And that other business.

She remembered first meeting Jake Leary, back on Earth, at the launch site deep in the Australian desert. They were scheduled to take the shuttle up to theNew Horizon , which languished in orbit encased in its skeletal dry dock.

Joan Betts, distinguished xenoanthropologist, author of the award-winning volumeThe Life and Customs of the Marine Saurians . Three years of poking around that Sea Devil base, the one that had launched that attack in 2084, piecing together details of an ancient culture and society, long disappeared before mammals had taken their place.

She recalled the summons. She was perfect, said Helen Percival. She was used to working in unfriendly environments, figuring out alien psychology. How would she like to go to Proxima 2 and study the little animals that lived there? What an opportunity. Chance in a lifetime.

And she believed it. There was no cynicism involved. She was tired and exhausted and the award had gone to her head and she wanted more.

Jake Leary was a big bear of a man. Full of life and afraid of nothing. He seemed to think that eight years struggling to survive on an alien planet was the best adventure that could happen to a boy.

Even when they had walked out into the Proximan unlight and realised just how much they would have to do just to survive, all the forgiveness that was needed after the arguments and fights and the claustrophobia of the endless journey, his first thought was to get walking down to the sea, to see what was there. She had gone with him, her hair not quite grey then, and they had swum in the shimmering, colourless water. Just so he could do it first, and never mind the shouting and swearing as the exhausted colonists began to strip the spaceship.

Once there was a little girl from Connecticut who got old. Whisked away by her own ambition. What had that little girl wanted? A family? Friends? She couldn't remember.

And now, what was left of her? A grey-haired eccentric with a terrible

secret. She realised that part of her wanted the Doctor to know everything.

***

In the end she had to go back to her hut. She had been watching him for two hours and in all that time he had never stirred.

She loved the little Proximans and he seemed to have a rapport with them. She hadn't exaggerated when she'd said the other colonists found the native animals disturbing. If anything, she'd underplayed it. They hated them. It was as if they represented some symbol of the planet, a reinforcement that it wasn't just theirs for the taking. Perhaps they mirrored the colonists' greed for exploitation a little too well.

She knew she was here as a token gesture towards Proxima 2, a pathetic little sign that said, 'Well, we know we're having the place but we're interested in you, honest.' She had fought with Percival over and over to try to preserve this alien race but the position was clear. Evolution would win and humanity, whatever else it did badly, was a past master at survival. The Proximans would eventually die out whatever she did. All that would be left would be her picking her way through their bones to find out what they had once been. Was this why the Doctor had disturbed her so badly? Not just the other thing? Could he, in some improbable manner, help her save them from inevitable extinction?

She was beginning to wonder whether there was something in the telepathy theory because the urge to confess all to him had become unbearable. Was it possible he, or something, had been working at her mind, to take that suicidal plunge? She tried not to believe it. It was her own guilt. It had to be.

Only when she thought of what Percival and the workmen would do to her if they found out did she realise she had to get away.

She clambered over the rocks, aware that she must seem to be unnaturally hurrying. Her bags and hair were flying all over the place as she climbed down far too quickly. More than once she slipped - her plimsolls were old and the grip worn smooth - and she nearly turned her ankle.

Breathing heavily, she reached the hut and threw her bag across the workbench. Her instruments knocked over the knick-knacks she kept

with her: the dried flowers in the chipped vase, the photograph of her receiving the prize, the odd Proximan stone bas-reliefs. She had to get straight to the telephone, although he'd told her so many times it was too dangerous to use.

Evening was drawing in and she was aware that the light outside was fading. Would he be there? He'd told her how to run the cable and keep it hidden. She had felt so sure of him at the time, despite his obvious illness. Now, what with the Doctor here, how could she be so sure?

She heard the shrill ringing at his end. God knew what he did with his time all day. Making plans for whatever it was that obsessed him, the things he said needed doing. He'd told her to be careful, to stay away from people. Was this what he had meant?

Someone picked up at the other end.

A hand dropped on to her shoulder. Joan Berts screamed.

'Something wrong?' came a calm voice from behind her. Joan felt her grip grow rubbery and she couldn't hold the receiver. It dropped to the floor, its casing splitting open.

The Doctor.

'Did I disturb you?'he said pleasantly, picking up the pieces of the telephone.

Joan tried to arrange her hair. 'N-no. It wasn't important.' She turned to see him sit himself at her workbench stool. He started to tidy the items she'd spilled across it. When he'd done that, he hoisted the telephone on to the bench and began inspecting the damage.

A friend of yours?' he asked.

'No. Not really.'

'I thought it seemed important.'

Joan licked her lips. 'Well, it was. A bit.'

He held up the receiver. Wires and the circuit board hung loose.'Don't worry. I'll have it fixed in a jiffy.'

'It's all right, Doctor. Thank you. I'd better attend to it personally.'

'Are you sure? It's not a difficult job.'

'No.'

She got her breathing under control. Why don't you just go away? she hissed inside. I don't want this. I just want to help the Proximans. For a moment, she hated Jake Leary.

The Doctor got back to his repair work. She realised she would have to sort this out. After a few seconds, she began to sidle towards the door. He wasn't looking up.

'Aren't you going to ask me how I got on?' he asked, just as she was turning the handle.

'What do you mean?'

'Joan,' he said, and at last he swivelled around to her. 'Why don't you tell me -where he is?'

His stare was penetrating, as bad as the Proximans'. She sensed something behind his eyes, some will that would keep pushing her, the orbs burning into her brain, digging around, not stopping until she gave it up, told him, told him what he had to know.'You've got to tell mejoan. The killings aren't going to stop until I find him.'

She was going to tell him, she was. It was his eyes, his gorgeous eyes. So warm, so intelligent. He could help. He really could help. 'I don't know what you mean,' she managed, a last act of defiance. A plea to herself more than anything.

'I looked it up in the records.Your relationship with him. It has to be you. He couldn't go on this long without help.'

'Please.' She twisted in the gentle grip. She wanted to look away, to leave. He wouldn't stop her: there was no malice in him, just that

burning, insistent need to help. But she had promised. She heard a rushing sound in her ears and the workshop was beginning to blur. Why was it so hot in here?

And then he blinked and Joan found herself rushing for the door. She was out and sprinting away, towards the main highway, gulping down air.

Chapter Nine
The Doctor

He had certainly found out a lot more than he had anticipated. Joan Belts, the Proximans, the nest.

He was furtive now, tracking the unfortunate Joan as she made her way through the city to where Jake Leary would be hiding out.

His head was still ringing from his vigil at the rocks. The images bounced off the walls in his mind like an echo.

The shape had been unformed, unfocused, the symbolic representation of something unused to interpretation by a non-Proximan mind. As he stared deep into the circles on the rocks he could feel his mind being snatched away, the self submerging with the surrounding Proximan natives. They were more than telepathic, they had powers that went beyond even empathy. He had become a Proximan. And more.

He had felt his identity, his sense of self, connect with one single entity, linking with one powerful network. Not a group mind, not quite that, more a collusion, a co-ordination.

He was reminded of his own regeneration capabilities: a single being existing in fragments, each separate, its own personality, yet part of the whole, the greater thing that lived called the Doctor, the life more than the sum of its parts.

This process had stung him.He had surprised himself with his reaction to the loss of self. He had panicked. He just couldn't give himself up. He couldn't.

Somehow, he had forced himself to focus, to retain his sense of self. He had moved, through their living history, back into the mountains. Centuries passed. Things changed.
Almost imperceptibly. He had felt himself irresistibly drawn inward. Some force, like gravity or the nucleus of an atom. He was being pulled towards a black hole. Not a metaphor, a literal image. A black hole in time and space. Part of the Proximan life yet at the same time not.

A shadow seemed to stain the life he was becoming, like a black filter drawing itself over a lens. The Doctor felt a chill, a loathsome cold sheet

spreading over his new self. He discerned a shape - ancient and toadlike in its rubbery, speckled carapace. It barged its way into the mind, expanding bubbles of fibrous foam.

He tried to back out, knowing it wasn't real, that it had happened centuries ago, that this presence was an image. It surprised him by fighting back, the gravitational pull too strong. It tugged at him in mighty jerks, expecting to take him. He was cold, cold as frozen metal. He heard whispered, guttural words like an incantation. Words ancient and terrible. A consciousness alien and malign.You are mine, little man. I am you. I always have been.

Something inside him, the old insistence thathe would not be tamed that had kept itself in reserve despite his wishes, the will to overcome that had kept him together for so long, refused to let go. It fought its way through the smothering blanket back to the rock scrawls.

He saw himself, as if rushing from the mountains at a colossal speed, a body sitting staring at a stone, surrounded by a ring of the People. Only when he had smashed like white lightning back into himself did he realise they had helped him. It hadn't been just his willpower that had saved him. They had mimicked his strength, combined with him to make him strong.

The mountain roared. He felt himself coming back to life, becoming the Doctor again. He scrabbled for a word, something he could bring back into linear time. The Proximans helped. F'Seeta , they said. Face-Eater.

Then it was sun and dust and heat again. He was the Doctor. He was in a nest on Proxima 2. The mountains stood like bears in the distance.

The sweat dried cold on his Time Lord body.

***

Joan Betts was picking her way through the half-built ruins of some building site.

The Doctor could see where she was heading. A small concrete hut, tucked in the shadow of a skeletal tower. A red LED dot on the corrugated door indicated that the hut was in use and probably locked.

The sky was dark and the clear stars lit the rubble with a ghostly lunar

sheen. The Doctor kept to the shadows that stretched out across the site. He was shamefully good at sneaking after people. Despite all his commitment to openness and honesty there was an inevitability in having to use such tactics even though they were the tools of that which he was pledged to fight. And how exciting it all was, like playing a game.

As he knew she would, Joan gave the site a quick glance before opening the hut door. He was already hidden from her view. She typed in a quick combination on the keypad by the LED. Despite the fact that he was at least thirty metres away, he memorised the numbers instantly.

He felt sorry for Joan. He liked her. But shielding Leary was no help to anyone.

He remembered Percival talking about her, clearly resenting her intrusion upon the execs' well-ordered community. Even then he had wanted to know about the Proximans, already sure that more was going on than the actions of a lone killer. Percival didn't understand his mind.

She couldn't see the connections between them and Leary. It wasn't linear.

The Doctor shrugged as the hut door finally swung shut. Of course it wasn't linear. What a human concept, that the notion of the link between cause and effect was in any way an accurate map of the workings of the universe.

'Joan Betts is an unstable element,' Percival had said, trying to remain unperturbed by his insistence on rummaging through their Net. And sitting in her chair. 'Her psych-profile showed dangerously low troughs of resistance to emotional strain. Only her reputation and pressure from certain overly liberal members of the Council prevented me from vetoing her application for the mission.'

'It must have been awful for you,' he had replied, wondering how far he could go.

'Yes it was, actually,' she had snapped back. 'Especially as she shacked up with Leary in the first week. Two lunatics together.'

At that instant he had known. Oh, he checked her file, and Leary's, and sent Sam down to the medical wing to find out about the murders, but he had known then that Joan Betts was the key to the mystery. Part of this

nonlinear thinking that Percival found so difficult to comprehend. Leary couldn't have survived for so long on his own, not with so many colonists after his blood. Someone was hiding him. And it could only be her.

He remembered repairing her notebook. The aesthetic mess on her workbench. He was finding himself growing more and more fond of the little things of life. Tools, fruit, old photographs. Was he getting old? Was life, like arteries, hardening with age?

A rustle of dust to his left interrupted his thought processes.

Enough. Time for action.

The Doctor brushed himself down and jogged to the hut. His slender fingers tapped at the keypad and he heard a click as the door unlocked itself.

He made his way inside. He had been right. A metal ladder, fingerprints powdering the rungs, led down into darkness. A rich, organic stink assailed his nostrils. He took a deep breath and began to climb down.

There was some illumination, a few hastily hung lamps that cast pools of light along a tunnel. Somewhere ahead, the sound of water. Despite the smell the tunnel was cool, refreshing after the warmth of the night.

He crept, alert for any human sounds. Should he try to intercept Joan before she made contact with Leary? Even if he wasn't the killer he might be dangerous. He certainly wasn't going to be happy about his hiding place being discovered. And, of course, there was always the possibility that he really was behind everything.

He decided to wait. Out of character, perhaps, he felt he had the reputation, certainly with Sam, that he rushed in where angels feared to tread, but in this case there was too much he didn't know, like the price of ice cream.

There was a dark smudge about thirty metres ahead, large enough for a little hidy-hole. He spotted a flash of movement, Joan's tan coat, then the word, 'Jake?', the question hanging in the tunnel like a lump of rubber. A figure moved ahead of her, shrouded in darkness.'Joan,' it said with a strong coffee-brown voice. A very familiar voice.

Joan seemed to back away.'What are you doing here?' she said.

Why did he feel so cold? Goosebumps were racing along his arms. A rush of air froze his skin. Something was wrong, the old knowledge. There was a picture in his mind: the cell, on Ha'olam where he'd rotted for three years and the sickening fear that he would never escape. The tunnel lamps seemed tinged green.

The figure with its stretching arms wasn't Jake Leary. He knew he would be too late.

'No,' said Joan breathlessly, away in the distance. With a voice that already knew it was lost.

The Doctor started to run towards her, legs weightless with panic. 'Joan!' he yelled in a voice high and breathy. He saw the woman jump and turn.'Doctor!' she shrieked.

The shape moved in the darkness behind her, hands that became mouths. When it spoke, it was speaking to him. Time seemed frozen - he felt like a photographic image trapped in mid-movement. The ground beneath him had no solidity, no weight.

'Doctor,' said the figure, blurring, altering its form. 'How nice of you to come. I want to show you something.'

The Doctor saw the woman lifted into the air. Two spots of light: could they have been her eyes, glinting wide? Tears filled his face. 'Joan, please...' was all he could manage. He didn't seem to be gaining any ground.

The figure was unfolding itself. The Doctor saw white bones, a gleaming femur the size of a pillar, chattering, giggling, gumless teeth, the sockets where its eyes should have been.

Joan Betts screamed. A deafening, heart-stopping noise that raced in horror towards him.

The scream became a gurgle and then nothing. Except a dry chuckle, like rotten leaves scraping against one another. The green light flared bright, then split into a thousand sparkling motes, washing over Joan's shrinking body like liquid.

His instincts, those genetic codes that governed survival, screamed at

him to run, that the show was over. Joan was gone. He ignored himself and ran towards the glowing light. If there was a chance, even a slight chance...

The particles of light pulsed, almost scattered. Then, as he approached what he already could see was a corpse, the green gathered itself and darted at him, to quick to avoid. He tried to skid to a halt but the light was flashing straight in his eyes.

Something (the Face-Eater?) was pushing thick fingers through his mind. Little man , it said, you should not have come here, to my home. I have many, many surprises for you. And, when I'm done, your friend, Sam. I think I'll visit her. Soon. Now, what sweet pleasures shall I devise for her benefit?

The Doctor felt it shredding through his memories, trying to locate an image, a solid thought that it could suck dry. The Doctor realised he had expected this attack. He refused to allow it anchor, kept the memories at bay. He visualised something neutral, a barrier to trap the Face-Eater. His own focal point. A flame burning placidly on a candle. Nothing more. The creature inside him bellowed with rage, unable to grip. It needed a face, a person, something emotional. He refused, would not submit to it.

Would it try a physical assault? Not now - it couldn't come in. He wouldn't let it.

He found himself running and then the beast was gone. He felt giddy as the suction snapped off. The green flashes cleared from his vision. A headache was drumming at his brain as he ran further along the dark tunnel. He heard a roar from behind, a sticky crackle as the Face-Eater coalesced into some powerful, meaty form. It was going to try something more direct.

The headache was a doozy, a real peach, as Sam might have said. The Doctor tried shaking his head to regain his orientation. The dammed memories were flooding him now, the candle long extinguished. They were random, appearing unbidden and uncontrolled. He saw Susan and Polly laughing, his old diary, a Prydonian headdress, Sam's mad, immortal, perfect face, a Cyberman tumbling through space. A partridge in a pear tree. A man is the sum of his memories. A Time Lord even more so.

If the shape-shifter took him now he would be powerless.

It was right behind him, howling with hunger. He tried a half-turn and felt his ankle slip away in the gravel. He saw the pit opening up in front of him. The world turned sideways. The beast, in whatever indescribable guise it now resided, clacked over him, teeth growing and widening, huge elongated bones shoring it to the ceiling.

He was falling forward. The hole in the ground moved in slow motion. He wasn't going to be able to stop himself.

Claws scrabbled at his back and then he was dropping, the dusty wind flying past him, trying to hold him up. His fingers scraped concrete, drawing blood. It felt like forever.

Then he hit the ground, or something. He heard part of his body snap and split open but felt nothing. The roaring was now his own mind, preparing him for unconsciousness. There was a brief moment of intense pain and then, thankfully, nothing.

ALL CHANGE

Chapter Ten
At the Mountains of Madness

Sam entered Percival's office with ease, thanks to the Doctor's little box of tricks. Actually, they hadn't made it very difficult. It was just a question of a few locked doors and reflecting screen loops for the CCTV She finished spraying the camera and replaced the can in her burglar's rucksack. Non-CFC, she noted with relief. The red light next to the lens flickered once, then began replaying its last few minutes over and over again. The data-umph spray would last a quarter of an hour. Don't ask how it works, she thought, it just does.

She and Fuller had been awake most of the night waiting for the Doctor to return from wherever it was he didn't say he was going. She couldn't help herself worrying, despite the fact that he was always disappearing for days, even years on end, and always came back with a smile and a 'what, me?' on his face. She betted that his mum, if he had one, would have been in a constant state of agony as she waited with dread to see what little Doc had done this time. The thought of the Doctor's mum yelling out 'Get in for yer tea!' into the Gallifreyan suburb started her off. She had to muffle her giggles as she picked the lock on the Exec's office.

Sam had the uncomfortable feeling that that little fascist Percival was planning something very nasty for her. The fact that she had allowed them so much freedom up to now had to be worrying. In Sam's experience, once they got you locked up they tried to keep you locked up. So, young lady, she warned herself, no mucking about in here. Find the files relating to Leary's expedition and get the hell out.

She had always hated James Bond movies, cryptocapitalist male chauvinist pig, but couldn't help thinking she spent half her life doing exactly what he did. All right, that Timothy Dalton hadn't been bad.

The office door clicked open. Sam carefully replaced the pick and checked her watch. She had thirteen minutes left. Fuller was waiting down in the hospital refectory, presumably recovering from the tongue-lashing he had received when he had tried telling her not to do this.

The telescreens were blank. Although Percival wasn't here, there was evidence of her presence everywhere. The desk was immaculate, no stray pens, graffiti, piles of paper, nothing. A creaseless jacket hung on a

hook by the door, as if guarding the room.

Fuller had said the expedition records would probably be stored in her steel filing cabinet. Sam flicked the pen torch on and gave it a quick wave. She hoped that the colony was too poor for light or movement sensors.

There. The cabinet. She put the torch in her mouth and frisked its metal sides. No wires, no apparent detection devices. Just a plain old filing cabinet.

She felt herself perspiring in her black sweater. They had turned the air conditioning off for the night. Well, they really needed it in the day. It was so hot that Percival would have dripped on to her paperwork. And that would never do.

The filing cabinet was locked, so Sam produced her trusty Doctor™ lockpick once more. Squinting, she managed to pop the tumblers within thirty seconds.

Once again, everything was neat to the point of obsession. All the files clearly marked. Now all she had to do was look.

Fuller had seemed surprised at her thorough knowledge of successful burglary. Sam didn't think he really expected a girl to involve herself in this sort of thing. Actually, come to think of it, he had a touch of the James Bond about him, too. Got a bit put out when she'd mentioned specifics. Have a clear target, she had said, know exactly what you want. The Coors expedition report. Anything else would have to be a bonus.

The file was in the bottom drawer. Her hands were sticky - it really was hot in here. God knew what they would do if the air conditioning failed.

As she grabbed the file, she realised it shouldn't be this hot. Percival hadn't left the place unguarded after all. Oh no.

She straightened up and saw the heater unit just before it exploded. Clutching the file to her breast she dived over the desk, catching her thigh on the way down. A sheet of flame burst over her.

Jesus, this was for real. For a moment, Sam couldn't move. She tried to kick her brain into gear but it wouldn't work. Nothing but numbness that

had to be fear. She moaned as she heard the unmistakable crack of flames. All she could think was: oxygen, it'll eat up the oxygen. The heat was beyond her capacity to describe. This wasn't how she wanted to end up, pink and scalded and spending the rest of her short life screaming in agony while the doctors applied the cream to soothe the burns, the hideous burns...

You've got to get out of here. Why haven't the sprinklers switched in? Because Percival has turned them off, you idiot.

She raised her head. It was worse than she had thought. The fire on the desk singed her eyebrows. She screamed and beat out the flames. Her skin was so hot, it felt as if it was melting off. And now the smoke was lowering over her like a blanket. She felt tired, it was all so difficult. How was she going to get out of this? She knew she should be moving but the effort was too much. The oily smoke was seeping into her lungs. Come on. It had to be now or she would be burned alive.

With a rush of decision she climbed into the chair space beneath the desk, ignoring the terrible pain as it welded itself to her back. Grunting, she shouldered the desk across to the door. Where had she found the strength?

It was deafening in here. She'd had no idea fire would be so noisy. Her back was going to need treatment. Someone seemed to be rubbing an iron over it. She pushed her hands into the rucksack and tried to turn the desk round. No good. Whatever strength had got her this far now failed her. It was all taking so long. The smoke caught in her lungs and she found herself falling. She breathed in and found that she couldn't. Smoke. This would kill her long before the flames.

In the heat and the noise and the fumes, Sam felt her consciousness start to fall away. OK, she'd given it her best shot but it was all over. No way out.

She banged her head on the desk. It felt like her lungs were thick with treacle. Through clouds she watched as the flames began to eat their way through the desk top.

Then it was all wet and the burning air screamed as the sprinkler system, activated by Ben Fuller who had decided not to wait for her in the refectory after all, burst into life.

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He was hauling her along the corridor. She couldn't see properly and her lungs were hoarse with exertion. The pain in her back was indescribable but she was too busy trying to breathe to react to it.

Something was forced on to her mouth and all the fright came back. She fought him trying to get it off.

'It's an oxygen mask!' she heard him yell.'Stop it!'

Sam had enough presence of mind to do as he said and instantly it felt as if sweet slush-ice was being poured into her lungs.

'Can you stand?' he asked.'You've got to stand. Sam!'

She gulped down the vapour and felt it scour out the treacle. She nodded, forcing herself to regain orientation. Now the back pains kicked in.

'Don't speak. We've got to get out of here.'

An alarm went off. A real, external one, not the bells already clanging in her head. She pushed herself out of his grip. Her eyes cleared and she saw smoke spiralling from her clothes. She fell against a wall, the dizziness overtaking her.'I'm OK,' she rasped, the words crunching in her throat, scraping the sides like a mouthful of boiled sweets.

She blinked twice and realised they were on their way to the elevator. Of course. Percival. The gloves would be off now. Their forty-eight hours had been suspended. She would be after blood.

How had she known? Or was she always so paranoid she kept an incendiary bomb tucked inside her office for emergencies?

Fuller pulled her arm and together they made their way along the corridor. A uniformed guard turned a corner on them but Fuller shot him down with some kind of weird gun.

Sam tripped on the body but he caught her. The world was moving too fast. She needed to stop, get her back seen to. She pressed the oxygen mask to her face.

More running feet. And shouts. Then they were in the elevator and Fuller was stabbing at the buttons. She began to feel the world slipping away again and her back really did hurt.

'Stay with me, Sam,' insisted Fuller. 'We've just got to get to the car.'

'Oh fine,' she moaned, dropping the mask.

The night was dark, and didn't the stars look lovely? Sam stared up into the sky and giggled. She'd never seen them so bright before. It was as though someone had scrubbed them clean and shiny like little metal studs like that one she'd nearly had put in her nose in Camden Market...

'Sam!' she heard Fuller exhorting her. What the hell did they put in those oxygen masks? Again, she giggled. She was aware that she was running but couldn't feel her legs. It was as if she was a horse galloping - and didn't Ben look beautiful in this night sky? Ah, she felt certain everything was going to turn out fine. She wanted to kiss him.

Ben Fuller threw her into the back of his car. Fine lines, like a web, grew over her vision. She felt sharp stabs of pain in her back and then she was falling, falling into the mock leather seat. It smelled new.

***

Days passed. At least it felt like days. For ages, her back felt as if the flames of the office fire were still burning across it. She remembered screaming, begging Fuller to kill her. Instead, to her eventual relief, he declined the offer. He pumped her full of drugs and gave her regular rubdowns with some kind of soothing lotion. She heard him saying that no serious damage had been done, that he had seen Dr Rupinder, that the new wonder drugs and gels developed for the colony would leave her unmarked.

At last, the curtains swept open in her mind and she awoke. The pain was nothing more than an irritating itch.

She was lying on a mattress somewhere cool and dark.

'Feeling better?' Fuller asked brightly, sitting in a plastic chair watching her. She was surrounded by empty tubs of some jelly-like medical goo. Her throat was dry, burning with thirst.

'Water,' she croaked.

Fuller stood up and unscrewed a flask. Sam drank down deeply, thinking she could never assuage that need for liquid. It spewed down her ruined T-shirt.

'Careful,'Fuller warned.'You'll just bring it all back up again.'

'How long was I out?' she asked, when she couldn't drink any more that second.

"Three days. Percival's been busy. I don't think she's very pleased. She's got de Winter combing the city for us. When they're not breaking up workers' meetings.'

Sam choked. She had drunk too much. He took the flask off her. Nothing was left inside. 'What about the Doctor?' she spluttered.

Fuller shook his head. 'No sign. He seems to have completely disappeared. You didn't answer my question.'

Sam smiled. He was like an old mother hen.'What question was that?'

'How are you feeling?'

'You really want to know? I'm so ashamed. Caught like that. I'm glad the Doctor wasn't around to see it.' A thought struck her. 'The file?'

Fuller scavenged around in the flotsam surrounding her home-made hospital bed. He lifted the file from the floor. 'Here. You'll no doubt be smug to know that I had to pry it out of your hands. Such devotion to duty.'

She reached out a grabbing hand. 'Give it to me.'

He withdrew his arm. 'Uh uh. Not until you're better.'

'Don't be stupid, I'm fine.'

He didn't give it to her.'No, it's all right,' he said cryptically.

'What?'

"Think nothing of it.'

'What?'

'Saving your life. Dragging you out of a burning room like some nineteenth-century hero.'

So, it was a game. He liked to flirt, did he? 'Mr Fuller,' she said severely. 'When you brought me here, remember now, did I cry out in pain?'

She had got him confused. 'You did,' he replied furtively.

'Did I scream in agony?'

'You did.'

'Writhe around cursing you, screaming at you while skin and blood and pus poured off my back.'

'That sounds about right.'

'Did I vomit continuously.'

'Not just vomit.'

'Then I think you've got just about everything out of me that you're going to get.'

He smiled again. He really, really was very, very good looking. 'I see.'

'However, because you asked me: thanks.'

The smile became warmer. 'Don't kill me with gratitude.'

She sat up, leaning towards him. 'Just give me the file, Police Chief.'

Fuller looked down at his smoke-blackened uniform. 'It's ex-Police Chief now.'

At last he gave it up. With a sigh, he reached across and handed it to her. Apart from a little melting on the cover it seemed intact. To think she'd almost got herself killed over it.

'I'll leave you to get on with it,'he said.'I'm going to get you some more medication. In about two hours that back of yours is going to hurt like hell. And you could probably do with some food.'

Sam looked up at him. 'What are you? My nurse?'

He shrugged.'Might as well be. Got nothing else to do. And you obviously can't look after yourself.'

She snarled playfully at him.'Get out of here.'

He raised his hands, palms out, to pacify her.'I'm going, I'm going.' He stretched as he stood and Sam realised he must have been sitting watching her for quite some time. Oddly, this realisation made her feel a lot, lot better.

***

When he had gone, she tried to work out why she had risked everything to get this file. It had felt important at the time, back in the refectory when they were drawing up their amazing plan of action. It was a police procedural. She was Miss Marple or somebody, piecing together the evidence. Except Miss Marple didn't get firebombed looking for clues.

She sat in her bed and tried to put off reading the report of Coors's expedition. She realised it was because she didn't want to know that it might not have been worth it. Why had she felt she needed the file? It didn't take much working out. She wanted Leary, the poor, oppressed, misunderstood renegade, to be innocent and Percival, the bad corporate drone, to be guilty. And now here she was and she didn't have a clue whether she had been right or not.

Would the Doctor have condoned what she had done? After all, she had pretty much got the execs after her blood, and Fuller under suspicion into the bargain. Where was he when she needed him to pat her on the head and tell her everything was all right? Was he all right? What would he do
now?

He wouldn't sit about moping about how unfair the world was, that was for damn sure. He would get on and read the file.

So that was what she would do.

***

The file, after a few preliminary notes, consisted mainly of a transcript. Jake Leary must have carried one of those electronic notebooks into which he dictated the progress of the expedition.

Sam felt a twinge of unease as she read. She was getting the naked thoughts of this man, whom she had never met, who was running around the city killing people. Or, alternatively, not killing them. She had never liked those voyeuristic
biographies of true crime, the picking away at the lives of mass murderers, the reader simultaneously nauseated yet revelling in the extremes of obscenity. If he was the killer, did she really feel strong enough to immerse herself in his mind?

There was no choice, she had to do this.

She read.

August 15th 2130. Have completed the long, tedious haul across the plain. For those interested in such things, the precise distance from the edge of Proxima City to the initial mountain escarpments has been measured by Mr Price as 66 kilometres. Ifs enough to say that we are here. I'll let the devices in this machine do all the measuring and analysing from now on.

They rise almost vertically from the plain, suggesting to me they were formed by some volcanic activity. Block mountains, reminding me of the Great Basin in Utah. They seem in the main to be basalt with a high silica percentage, with some slate-like compounds thrown in. High degree of asymmetrical folding. No obvious ways in or through.

Our climbers, Kishimoto and Barr, have begun a preliminary ascent over the first of the escarpments.

Professor Coors's plan is to find a cavern where we will be able to observe the mountain strata without having to spend much time digging boreholes. The team seem a little uneasy. The way the mountains stretch straight up like, I don't know, fingers or something, to such a gigantic height. It's got them cowed. As for me, I love it here. Reminds me of home. We are the first humans to stand on these rocks. V. exhilarated.

August 16th 2130. After a day's climb Barr finally found a way into the mountain. Clambering over these viciously sharp rocks has slowed us right down. Price, not known for his climbing experience, has suffered greatly. Professor Coors told me he was considering pitching camp here and reducing the ambition of the expedition. Only much urging from myself and Barr persuaded him to go on. Coors, in my opinion, lacks the sense of awe and inquisitiveness that has overwhelmed me. We may learn less from this mission than I had looked forward to.

Barr located a fissure in the rock early this morning. I had noticed high up on one of the ledges that a number of smaller boulders had fallen away, suggesting a possible flaw in this solid rock. She went for a 'quick look' as she called it and found a gap. We are preparing to lift the surveying equipment. Price's hands are quite badly cut and I do not believe Coors's heart is in this. It's going to be difficult but think what we might find. By the way, I apologise, Ms Percival, for offering candid judgements of my team leader. I'll try to hold my tongue.

Not so dusty up here, out of the city, although there is a strange odour in the air, faintly unpleasant.

August 16th 2130. Later Well, we're in. I'm waving the notebook around so you'll get a good diagnostic of the strata. Much colder now. Relief after the heat of the day. Price now has sunstroke as well as the cuts. Great.

Joan, have been searching for fossils for you like you asked. Sorry, can't find anything at all. It's as if nothing has ever lived here - plants, animals, dinosaur men, nothing. Makes me wonder. How did those little Proximans you're so fond of get here?

Coors much relieved that we can finally make a camp. This cavern stretches deep underground. I went for a little stroll down it with Barr but we ran out of daylight before we could get even half a kilometre. Sorry, but the rest of today's log will have to be technical. Got to conserve the batteries, you know. Will charge notebook overnight and get back to you tomorrow.

August 17th 2130. Terrific thunderstorm last night. Absolutely

phenomenal. Lightning was blowing great shards of the mountain apart. Noise utterly deafening. We were completely at the mercy of the elements. Found ourselves clutching each other, trying to find solace in companionship. Not something I'm used to. Water streamed through our little cavern in torrents. Lost some of the equipment but have determined to go down further to retrieve it. It's a good excuse that even Coors can't argue with. He has told me to my face he feels I am reckless. Don't mind reporting that. He isn't the first.

While collecting data this morning, can at last report that I have found my first fossil. Ifs the leaf of a megatherm I think. Some kind of palm tree perhaps. If this was Earth (or Mars - hurrah!) I would date it at something like 8,000 years old. Quite recent really. It's existence suggests to me that these mountains were once a hell of a lot hotter.

Will report later as am preparing to head down into the mountain with Barr.

August 17th 2130. Later. Barr is dead. I don't know what happened. Can't seem to remember. Coors suggests I retrace my steps. All right. We went along the rock tunnel for approximately three-quarters of a kilometre. Fantastically dark. Pitch-black, hardly dented by the torches. Temperature dropped alarmingly. We had found pieces of equipment washed here by the storm. Cooking materials, a few tools. Still soaked and gritty. Decided to leave it for the return journey. What we really wanted to do was explore.

Finally, the torches' reflections became caught and augmented by the ground - the tunnel ended and we found ourselves on what seemed to be a solid lake of ice. Not ice, though, quartz, a great unbroken sheet of it. Beautiful. Like water. All the colours caught in it.

I remember... I remember it got light somehow. I was going to remark on this to Barr when she... well, she just wasn't there any more.Just blood. So much blood.

I looked for her. I want that on record. I distinctly recall looking for her, calling her name, until somehow I found myself in the tunnel. Four hours I was down there, Coors tells me. Felt like four weeks. Now he wants us all to go down. Look for Barr Can't persuade him otherwise.

August 17th 2130. Night now. Not much power left in the batteries - need recharging but not staying. Coors and the others are dead, all of them. I killed them. Followed the tunnel down to the quartz lake. It seemed different this time. No sign of Barr - no blood, nothing.

They... thought I might have done it. Barr, I mean. Held me at gunpoint. Coors never liked me. Searched as much of the lake as we could without losing the light. Price v. frightened. Jumping at shadows, hearing noises, infecting the others. Great crystalline columns here. Reminded me of something, couldn't think what for a while. Then I thought: veins or something.

Curiosity overtook them. They got casual. Knew that we would never find Barr. Until... until... Price screaming. For real. Barr's face in the rock. Crystal. The others trying to run.dark more blood coors [non verbal sounds] face rock [non verbal sounds].'

Transcript ends.

Sam put down the file. The room seemed smudged with dark around her. Cold too.

She forced the images of the mountains from her mind.

No wonder Percival had kept the file hidden. Sam supposed that Leary might have done it, then concocted this story to cover his tracks. The log didn't make him out to be the stablest of men. Either way, Percival couldn't afford to release it. If Leary was the man, Percival had made a big mistake allowing him on the expedition. If not, and what was in the file was literally true, Proxima City was in deep trouble.

For a moment, Sam hoped that Leary was a murderer. At least that was something that could eventually be dealt with.

Otherwise, whatever he had seen - this face in the rock -it had come to the city to take them all.

Chapter Eleven
Tales of the City

Out on the streets, another shift ends. As dawn nudges its way out from the sea, the occupants of Proxima City see the clouds forming that for once will blot out that heavy, relentless sun.

In the Installation, the climate computers chatter and say rain. Much rain.

Tempers are frayed in the city. Workers are afraid for their jobs, their loved ones, their lives.

Casey Burns returns to her apartment, after her twelve-hour shift plumbing in service pipes in Central. Just what is going on here? She had expected hardship, expected it to be difficult. But never believed it would be one of their own. How many times had the GMC press offices boasted of their psych-profiling? No one with a criminal record, they promised, no one with the slightest degree of mental instability. Just good team-makers, workers who kept their heads down and got on with the job.

OK, there were those who were always going to slip through the net - Marlowe for one: everyone knew about what he was supposed to have done. That woman who worked in cabling, you know, the one who was supposed to have murdered her husband. But nothing like this.

Of course, it had to have been one of the execs. That guy Leary, the big man, there had always been something odd about him. And now Percival was going off the deep end. Installation heavy-duty security patrolling the streets, rousting whoever they damn well pleased, shutting down Seventh - not that she ever went there, you understand.

What would they do next?

Casey rereads the illegal flyer everyone found lying around in their workplaces in the night. The one asking them to join them in a demonstration to protest against these new security measures. She won't go, of course. All the talk was of the near riot in the park three days ago, where Percival wouldn't listen and only Chief Fuller's intervention calmed everything down. Workers' solidarity, fine. Getting yourself killed, no way.

Casey wonders, not for the first time in this last week, why she volunteered for this. Why she spent five years learning the trade, getting that lifetime opportunity to end up light years from home, to be treated just the same as in Jo'burg. No children, never. Just a place in history as one of the five thousand.

She thinks back to her time on Earth, which she knows she will never see again. Her mother, dead when Casey was seven, rotting in the township, listening to the gunfire outside. Eight kids had drained her dry. Six of them were now dead or in jail. Not her. This had to be better than that. They were going to have to make it better. Proxima was her life now. Could she really stand by and wait for all the old vices to come back and ruin it all?

Casey thinks about her nightmares too. About her mother knocking at the window, dried and dead, pleading for Casey to come out. Must be the stress.

Maybe they had killed Clark, like some were saying. Maybe Marlowe too.

As she pours herself some of the tasteless ersatz coffee and waits for the storm to come, Casey Burns decides she will go to that demonstration after all.

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From their depots around the city, the Installation Security Police are emerging. They converge on Central Plaza, that concrete arena some architect had fondly designed to replicate a town square.

The vans are large and ugly. There is a depressingly familiar air about them, perhaps stemming from the mass of wires and aerials that sprout from their roofs. It seems, once again, that the bulk of technological innovation has been utilised for reigning in those it is meant to liberate.

The vans move slowly through the city, their great armoured hides giving them the air of giant hogs snuffling their way to the centre. Where Commandant de Winter, smiling smugly, is waiting for them. He is proud of the impact they are making. The workers he has seen are intimidated and angry.

One hundred security troops, the entire contingent, will be out on the

streets by twilight. Another hundred civilian defence volunteers will join, riot control part of their remit, along with firefighting, medical and commissary support.

De Winter has been waiting two years for this. He knew it would come. He has had faith. As the city built itself, it seemed less and less likely that an exterior threat was ever going to present itself. He realised his real purpose was to crush the enemy within. And, in that time, Proxitna City has grown soft. Just look at Seventh, that godless pit of prostitution and drunkenness. Percival has done nothing but watch this cancer eat away at that which was pure. Their new white home, already sick.

He has bided his time building his body and mind, preparing a thousand strategies, overseeing countless training exercises, selecting and promoting officers who, like him, could see what inevitably would be. The final battle between good and evil.

The vans assemble. The plaza is filled with the roars of engines and the shouts of men with a purpose. Batons are issued, stun guns charged, gas pellets stowed, face shields lowered.

De Winter feels elation. The time has come to bring the city to its senses. He leaps up into his command van, flexing his muscles to feel the heavy, padded armour mirror his actions. He snatches the microphone for the van's PA system. He scans what has now become his parade ground, a hundred helmets gleaming in the light. Mighty.

'You are a noble army!' he yells. 'A righteous army! You are my knights! This city is sick and it must be cured. Today the city will be cleansed!' He looks around. Luckily the face shield on his helmet hides his wide grin. He wants to look stern for his children. 'We begin with Seventh!' he screams, and the crowd goes wild.

***

Helen Percival rarely leaves the burned out ruin of her office. The maintenance detail redecorate around her as she eats and sleeps in her chair. She has needed the reassurance of her home ever since she gave the order to impose maximum sanctions on the city. De Winter could hardly keep the smile off his face, his skin beetrooting under his cropped grey hair. Helen has made one person happy on the planet, at least.

Nameless technicians have restored the telescreens in her office. She watches carefully what is going on, flicking through the CCTVs almost faster than she can react to the images. The Doctor is who she wants, gone for four days now. If not him, Jones would do, or Fuller, Betts or even bloody Leary. So many against her, out there now, hiding like the Rats in the ruins.

De Winter will find them, he must. Comb every building, every street, the sewer pipes underneath their feet. They are there.

She must make it absolutely clear that these criminals are responsible for the clampdown. Her workforce is understandably angry but Helen is sure they will come round in the end. After all, this is for their own good. Do they really want this... this fifth column alive and at work, undermining everything they have worked for? She wouldn't be svoprised if they themselves weren't harbouring Leary, the Doctor and the others.

De Winter's job is to keep order, to protect the civilians from themselves, to keep the colony alive. The fire in her office was an accident, the intruder messing with the heater unit and having it blow up in her face. Jake Leary has now killed four men in Proxima City. These must be considered facts, for the sake of the common good.

Something is worrying her. She realises she is using this rhetoric on herself to stop herself thinking. What is it? She swivels round in her chair to face the closed door. She thought Horton had come in.

She thinks back to her talk with Sun. He emerged last night from his coma after four days of shock. Rupinder, another one she doesn't trust but has under control, finally agreed to her demand to use stimulants to break his weakness.

Sun emerged spluttering from whatever darkness he had been inside to babble about the basement in the Castanedes Tower and how he and Marlowe had blundered in there on some stupid childish investigation. Helen isn't surprised that Leary had cornered them. They were an accident waiting to happen. She has ordered de Winter to put a cordon round that building.

Sun had been scared, that was obvious, but for Helen the story has filled her with glee. It has confirmed everything.

This nonsense of Fuller's has been exposed for what it is. The explanation is simple. She has ordered Rupinder to get Sun sedated and allow no one to talk to him.

Now is the time for her to act. Catch him. That's all she wants. Do whatever it takes, de Winter. Just catch him.

She turns again, sure that she has seen someone leaving the office, just having closed the door. She is certain she caught a flash of red.

She steps up and out into the main office. Horton is there, fielding calls from the security patrols. He is in shirtsleeves and seems surprised to see her. The other admin staff glance at her secretively.

'Yes, ma'am?' asks Horton, cradling the phone in his shoulder.

Helen looks round. 'Did you... somebody just come into my office?'

Horton frowns. He too looks around the office. The staff pretend to get back to work. 'No, ma'am. I've ordered all appointments to come through me. Like you said.'

No. Nobody there. Nobody wearing red. 'Good,' she replies. 'Good.' And goes back inside.

Helen Percival returns to her vigil at the telescreens, sure that someone is watching her, from somewhere, judging her actions. For fifteen minutes she searches the office for bugs or cameras, ignoring Horton's frantic buzzing, desperate as he is to inform her that the security patrols have killed their first worker, out on Seventh in a bar called Heaven, when a drunk called Pederson threw a bottle at de Winter.

***

Sam had recovered sufficiently from her wounds to accompany Fuller to his rendezvous with the man who had been supplying them with food and medical supplies.

She had been thinking about nanites again. If only she hadn't raved in delirium for the last couple of days, she might have got a clearer picture as to the speed of her recovery. Those burns on her back, could the colony drugs have cured her that quickly? Really?

She'd thought they were gone. She'd certainly felt pain again, too much, but was she absolutely pure? It was beginning to become an obsession, the thought that even a trace of the nanites might still exist in her body made her sick. She had to be one hundred per cent sure.

Fuller was unhappy, insisting that she needed a few more days' rest in their little hideaway apartment deep in Port Sector, when she protested, unable to cope with her own brooding, he soon realised the futility of trying to keep her still.

They met Jeffries down at the docks. Fuller had told her that this was the biggest rabbit warren in the colony and she could believe it. Gigantic cranes, bigger than skyscrapers, were half built right out into the sea, cables and scaffolding revealing their intentions to climb even higher. Odd, spindly control cabins grew at the apex of metal stems like bulbs on the ends of stalks. Warehouses, dry docks, offices and sheds, all cluttered with bales of cable, rusting orange springs, mounds of concrete. No one could find them here.

Looking inland, Sam could see the spires of Proxima City, already bathed in a mist of pollution. Behind them, looking over them expectantly, were the mountains, where Leary had been. It was a chill morning and she could tell there was one hell of a storm on its way. Jeffries' car pulled up outside the office in which they were hiding. The car manoeuvred its way round the huge metal tracks laid for the portable cranes. Fuller beckoned for her to keep out of sight.

The paunchy deputy emerged huffing and puffing from his car. He adjusted his stetson, removed his mirror shades and looked around. He was clearly very nervous.

'Hey, cowboy!' called Fuller and stepped out into the road. Jeffries jumped.

'Man, you gave me a fright,' he said, leaning against the car in relief. 'All hell's breaking loose out there. I don't know what's going down. Brought you some clothes. And Doc Rupinder smuggled out some more supplies.'

Fuller gave Sam the nod and she followed him to the car. She was uncomfortably aware of Jeffries eyeing her up. 'What is going down?' she asked sternly, determined to put him in his place. She was rewarded with a blush. Fuller pulled a tan police uniform from the car and threw it

at Sam. 'I asked him to get one for you. It won't be Paris fashion but it's less conspicuous than wandering round in a burned T-shirt.'

He pulled one for himself and unselfconsciously began to get changed. Sam followed suit. The harsh fibres of the blouse scraped against the scars on her back. She tried to hold back the winces.

Jeffries' blush deepened. He swallowed and looked at Fuller.

'Well, ahh, they got us drivin' round all hours, looking for you. Every damn deputy. Installation Security taken over dispatch, checking up on us. All leave suspended. You and this Doctor.'

'He's missing?' Sam was shocked. Perhaps Percival had... no, he can look after himself.You know that.

'Last seen goin' off to see Sigourney the one that works the Rats.'

Rats, native Proximans. She'd learned that in the Installation. Nice to see humanity keeping up its impeccable record with alien races. Sigourney? No. Surely not. She snapped the buckles on the heavy tunic.

'Have there been any more deaths?' asked Fuller bluntly.

Jeffries tilted his gaze up to the cloudy sky.

'Tell me,' Fuller snapped.

'Found out from your friend the lady doctor. They found some guy called Sun wandering the outer roads four days ago. Just woken up. Apparently, he went to check out where Clark got tagged. Him and that big mother Marlowe. Marlowe never came out. Sun's mouthing that it's Leary that tagged him. Sun claimed he shot Leary and got away.'

'Shot him?' asked Fuller disbelievingly.

'Marlowe had built himself a gun. Sun found it lying on the floor, next to whatever was left of him.'

Fuller, now fully dressed (and it was amazing how well it fitted - she felt like a shapeless blanket next to him), looked at her. 'So it was Leary after all?'

Sam shook her head.'No. I don't believe it.You've read the log. Something else is doing this.'

Jeffries yawned. Sam realised just how exhausted he looked.

Fuller punched his deputy's arm. 'You OK?'

Jeffries straightened.'Working too hard. Nights. Big fight up on Seventh. Curfew's been called. Percival wants everyone off the streets. 'Cept when they gotta work of course.'

'What sort of fight?'

'That maniac de Winter shot dead a guy threw a bottle at him. Shot him right down. Some of the working guys, they had themselves a demonstration. Security dispersed 'em with tear gas. Since then, been driving round, trying to keep it calm. Must be getting tired. Keep seeing things that ain't there.'

Fuller turned away in disgust. 'What does Percival think she's doing? Does she want this place to erupt?'

Sam was thinking about what Jeffries had said.'What do you mean, seeing things?' she asked. Her tone was sufficiently altered to get the full attention of both policemen.

Jeffries looked embarrassed. 'I dunno. Keep dropping off in the car. Must have been asleep. Thought I saw... no, it's stupid...'

'Tell me.'

Jeffries had apparently found something interesting on the tips of his boots. Certainly he was gazing at them intently enough. ''Thought I saw... saw my brother. Looking at me out of a window. Down from one of the apartment blocks. Kinda grinning at me. It ain't nothing.'

'Your brother?' asked Fuller.

'Trick of the light,'replied Jeffries. 'Cause he's dead, ain't he?'

***

Thank god for Ben Fuller, thought Jeffries as he drove back to work. The

wind had sprung up now. Just before he turned away from the sea he saw that the sky was thick with black cloud.

He'd had his differences with his old chief in the past but in the main he'd deserved what he got. He was a footslogger, a -what did Fuller call it? - a plod. Never been one for the thinking.

Jeffries liked his job and had been genuinely surprised when his application for selection had been returned with the big gold word ACCEPTED emblazoned across the front. He remembered his old squad house in Austin, with the wise guys. He had been there when it had been delivered. They slapped his back, pleased for him. That business with Pete getting shot had changed him and they thought he needed it. They seemed to think that a lifetime on a new planet would be some kind of holiday. Jeffries sometimes felt that pan of their good cheer stemmed from the relief of getting rid of his miserable face.

He didn't think much about Proxima 2, about all the planning and the work and the enormity of the operation. It was just another beat, the important part of it being that it was as far away from Pete's bleeding, dying body as he could get.

Funny, because up until now it had worked. He hadn't thought about it for two years.

And then... Jesus, it had shaken him, the first time. Seeing that face in the window. He'd found himself screeching to a halt in the middle of the highway. He'd screwed up his eyes, thinking that the shock would have woken him up. None of them had been getting much time for sleep, what with the extra duty. But the face had stayed there. Second floor of a building so new it didn't even have a name.

They had stared at each other for what felt like, well just about forever. He kept thinking that Pete would just disappear, just like that, but he didn't. There was a warmth in Jeffries' heart as he stared. Tears too. He'd had to drive away, thinking he was losing it.

An hour later, he had gone back. He had cruised by Seventh, watching the security guys knocking seven bales of hell out of the bars and knew that he had had enough. He had intended to go home, whatever dispatch was telling him. He would visit Doc Rupinder and pick up more supplies for Fuller and the girl and get out of this madness.

Only he found himself outside that window again. He waited fifteen minutes, just staring. Pete was gone.

He had been reassured then. It was all in his mind. Until mid-afternoon the next day, when he saw Pete walking out of the Market Tower with a bagful of groceries and disappearing into one of the alleys that lined the Provisions Block.

Jeffries had swung the car round the busy, guarded street and driven like a madman around the block. It was him. It was. There could be no mistake. It was broad daylight this time. He parked quickly at the alley's exit and, once again, waited. After five minutes, he walked the alley himself, pushing past colonists, glaring right in their faces. No Pete. But he had been so sure.

Back on patrol he had thought about that face in the window. Although it hadn't moved, Jeffries had the distinct impression that Pete had been asking him for Something. There had been a cast to his expression, one familiar to him from childhood. His kid brother asking for help.

As he lay in bed for the few hours' rest , sleep refused to provide relief. He kept seeing Pete, over and over again. Lying in the gutter in Austin, gut-shot by some punk caught lifting stereos, pulling a gun as his brother strolled over to him. In the morgue, when Jeffries had identified his body. How could he be dead and here? It was all mixed up. It was like some kind of religious thing. There had been more than a few nut organisations back in the Republic who spend their time telling everyone who would listen that the Proxima colony was a slap in the face for God. That retribution would come for them. That the dead would rise and make judgement upon the living. No one took them seriously. He himself had laughed. Maybe they hadn't been so wrong after all.

Jesus, it was cold. He turned the heater on, the first time since he could remember when. Rain brgan thumping the roof of the car. Proximan rain was thick, like drops of mercury, first a sprinkle, then an attack, then a sprinkle again. He knew the climate scientists were trying to figure out why. On a planet with no vegetation, why all this rain? Something like that, whatever way round it was. He'd got it all mixed up. The same as seeing Pete again.

He drove back to the Port station house and wished for the first time that he'd stayed back on Earth.

***

Rupinder was tired. She'd been up all night again sorting out the bumps and smashes and wounds caused by Percival's 'security clampdown'

When the pour soul from the bar was wheeled in, she felt panic rise inside her. He hadn't been killed by Leary, or mystical monsters. They'd done it to themselves. The colony was falling apart. Letting that psychopath de Winter loose was declaring war on the population. The man was twice as dangerous as Leary. No wonder the workers were fighting back. He would annihilate them all.

In a way, the mounting toll of wounded had eased her troubled mind. Since Sun's confession, when he claimed... Well, what was it he claimed, tending to the injuries was soothing. A palliative to stop her thinking. The wards had been full of shouting, the doctors and nurses and patients all combining to create a numbing bedlam.

Now, the morning after, the old dreads were coming back. Why couldn't they justfind Leary? Even Percival's draconian measures seemedn worth it this morning. As long as they got him.

She poured herself a coffee, remembering the night that seemed like years ago when Ben and Sam had in the refectory and they had calmly discussed what it was they wanted to do. It was all moving too fast. She never got a break, hadn't been outside, only imagining the aggression and the repression going on up there. She was so tired, the lights in her office too bright. She couldn't keep herself together for much longer. All the secrecy, the lies. Smuggling the supplies to Jeffries to get to Ben, out on the run with Sam.

Percival had kept the story of the office fire very quiet. That had been the worst time. All her fears confirmed. She had known, suffered wild questioning from her boss, tried to find out what had happened, always hoping her trust in Ben Fuller was justified. Trust? Or something else, something that went beyond trust. It was all such a mess.

A silhouette appeared in the frosted plastic of her office window. For a second, Rupinder felt sick with fear. Not me. Not now.

The door opened. It was Sims, an intern, thin hair pulled back in a ponytail.

'Doctor,' he said brightly, his wispy ginger moustache curling over his pale lip. 'They've brought in another one.'

Rupinder waited for her heart to return to its normal beat. She nodded wearily.'What's the problem?'

'Broken leg, lacerations, a few bruises,' Sims replied. 'Some shock. That bloody fascist de Winter again, I think.'

'Careful what you say, Sims,' Rupinder said seriously. 'I might be an informer.'

Sims seemed confused. 'Yeah. Right.'

'Clean him up. I'll be along in a minute.'

The patient was unconscious. Sims hooked him up to the diagnostic equipment while Rupinder cut away the trouser and examined his broken leg. The skin was pale and smooth, not like a worker's at all. She wondered what he did in the colony. 'This is funny,' she said.

'Hmm,' said Sims idly, connecting the last of the sensors. He obviously

didn't find it funny.

'This fracture is months old. It's almost healed.'

Indeed, the bone had been expertly reset but there was none of the mottling or bleaching six weeks in plaster would have caused. She looked at the patient's face. Long, pale, framed with flowing brown hair. He looked more like a poet than a builder.

'If you think that's funny, you'll kill yourself at this.' Sims had switched the diag comp on and it was beeping away merrily.

'What is it?' asked Rupinder.

'Two hearts,' Sims replied, his hands already pressing buttons to get the machine working properly.

Chapter Twelve
Dear Heart

Fuller led Sam out of the docks on foot. She stated she was determined to find the Doctor, even if it meant going all the way to the other side of the city.

It wasn't too hard to dodge the vans: there were so many hiding places and he had a good idea of where Percival's spy cameras were. Even so, the security patrols were annoyingly persistent and he reckoned that more than once only their camouflage saved them.

The wind was really blowing now and the daylight dimmed to a muddy blue. Rain kept startling them with savage bursts that reduced visibility to a couple of metres. Once, as they passed through Central, shots from stun guns cracked right in front of them. They barely managed to wedge themselves between a couple of skips before half a dozen club-wielding workers ran out of the gloom pursued by a loudspeaker-droning security van. Armoured marksmen sat on the van roof, firing bright sparking shots after the fleeing gang. As they disappeared again, Fuller found that he was shocked at the extent of the city's breakdown. So quick.

He had grabbed Sam's hand and realised she was wincing through gritted teeth. Her back, still feeling the damage of those burns.

He hadn't insisted she remain in the dock hideaway. He knew her well enough to realise there would be no point. And another reason: he didn't want to admit that emotions were becoming part of the equation with Samantha Jones. There wasn't time. She was just a child. He wouldn't have looked at her twice on Earth. Besides, what did she think of him? The wrecked remains of a disgraced ex-chief of police. Hardly her 'type'. Anyway, this wasn't some cocktail party. He wasn't fourteen: he was forty. And they had work to do.

Sam squeezed his hand. 'You can let go now,' she said through a faceful of rainwater.

He rolled his eyes to suggest he had drifted off somewhere and let go. Slowly, they picked their way out from the skips and started again.

She was getting tired, although she'd never show it. Those days in bed and the severity of the burns had really taken their toll upon her stamina.

The jibes and wisecracks weren't quite so forthcoming now. If it hadn't been for her uncanny devotion to the Doctor, that odd old-fashioned-looking man, he believed she wouldn't have been well enough to travel. They had some kind of magnetism holding them together. Was he really jealous of that?

Fuller led her slowly through Central, trying to use the empty buildings both for cover and shelter. Even he was amazed as they traipsed through concrete shell after concrete shell, all spilling their innards of plumbing and wires, just how much work the colonists had actually done since they had got here. How hard Percival had been working them all this time. With only a fraction of Earth technology available and the severe limitations on their resources, this city really was a testament to human achievement.

Fuller wondered what would be left of it all in a hundred years, whether all the predictions would come true. The gateway to a whole empire, would that really happen? Was this planet really the first step to the galaxy?

Only if it didn't all get torn down. All this violence, this unrest, it had to be stopped.

They couldn't destroy it now, not after all this work. Ben Fuller realised he was really contemplating the removal of Helen Percival from her station as chosen Colony Executive.

It all went wrong when they reached the intersection between Central and Western.

Sam had been very quiet for about half an hour, her uniform stained black in the constant rain. Thunder and lightning crashed over their heads, a noise and a light that made the ground shake. It had taken them all day to get here and Fuller had the feeling night was going to be pitch-black. He was trying not to think about going down in that basement again. It seemed such a long time ago.

He made Sam rest, in a vast barn of a building. Some kind of warehouse. He forced some food down her, then gave her a quarter of an hour to sleep. She went straight away, lying against some unopened crates. Not once had she complained about feeling ill or tired. Her forehead was hot.
Worrying.

Fuller sat by her side, wishing he still smoked. And drank. His clothes were slowly drying now. Blue light barely shone through the high windows. Overhead in the metal rafters, a sack or something swayed gently in some lofty breeze. Fuller stared at it, feeling the movement hypnotising him into sleep.

He wished Jeffries had brought him a stun gun, something to use if their visit to the cellar turned nasty.

His eyes were rolling. Sam's breathing echoed gently in the empty building. In his half-sleep, Fuller found he was mentally making shapes in the swinging sack: the slash of a mouth,
gleaming eyes, a. mouth that moved silently, a head that bobbed. He had to be dropping off because, as the sack moved, he glimpsed stick limbs that seemed to clamp the sack to the rafters. The grinning head bulged like a slashed turnip.

He was seeingthat moment again. It all came back: Lily, the shattered room, that shape in the holograph, the rasping voice. What he would do to bring her back again. It had to be Sam that reminded him of the good times. Maybe it could be again, maybe, but you had to give these things time.You had to make them proud of you. So proud of you. So proud of you -

He wasn't dreaming. There was no breeze blowing that sack.

'Sam,' he hissed, guts frozen, panic making his breath stutter. The sack shifted itself. He could hardly see it in the dark, just a lumpen smudge.

'Hmm?' she moaned.

'Wake up. Now.'

He started to get to his feet, ignoring the cramps shooting up to his knees. 'Oh, what is it?' she asked, irritable.

The sack had stopped moving. It looked like a sack again. He couldn't tell what the hell it was. Something stabbed at his fingers. He was pushing them into the splintering plastic of the crates.

'You OK?' asked Sam, looking around, searching for the threat.'What is it?'

He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the sack. He had to be wrong. It was nothing. 'Nerves,' he said mournfully.

The door hammered open and he shrieked. Three shadows scrambled inside, dripping with rain. Outside, the storm was screeching.

'Crazy! It's crazy!' said one.

'Get that door shut. Now!'

A searchlight spun round the high windows, illuminating the rafters. Fuller followed its beam, waiting until he could see the... No. It was gone.

'How could they do it? Jesus, how could they?'A woman's voice, a thick Latin accent filled with despair. 'Shooting him like that!'

'Pigs!' yelled the first man, the little one who had talked about crazy. The second slapped his face.

'Shut your mouth or we're all dead, you understand? Now hold on to this, just in case.'

Despite the gloom, Fuller saw him pass the smaller man something. Even in silhouette, he could tell it was a firearm. Behind him he sensed Sam pushing herself against the crate, deeper into the shadow.

'You know how to use this?' asked the larger man. "Cause I don't want you punkin' out on us. They're out for blood and we can't let them find us.'

'Muggy,' wailed the woman, pacing the warehouse. 'For nothing, they shoot him down. Poor Muggy!'

She stopped and Fuller realised she had seen him. 'Johnny,' she hissed. The larger man turned towards them. Blood leaked from a cut in his dark forehead.

'Stay back,' he whispered to Sam.

'No,' she replied but not before he had stood up, shielding her body.

'Who are you?' barked the large man. What had she called him? Johnny?

'Looks like a cop. Waste him,' said Tiny, anticipation in his voice.

'Wait; Fuller interrupted. 'I'm not Installation Security. I'm-'

'You're Fuller,' said the woman. "They want you bad.'

'I'll use this on him; giggled Tiny, waving the gun. 'Get me some revenge for Muggy.'

'No,' said Johnny. "This could be our chance. We could use him. Make a deal.'

'Before you decide my fate for me,' Fuller interrupted. 'Can I say something?'

'No,' snapped Tiny. 'Let's kill him.'

'Shut up,' said Johnny. 'What you got to offer us? Bearing in mind your goons are out there capping our people.'

He was straining his ears trying to figure out what Sam might be doing to get away. 'Believe it or not,' he offered languidly, trying to keep any strain out of his voice, 'I'm trying to help you.' At least this was a situation he was trained to deal with.

'Crap.' said Tiny. 'You're a cop.'

'Not any more. Percival wants me dead. Just like she wants you tamed.'

The woman was moving closer to him. He ran through the various permutations he had learned in ECID to get out of his predicament. He didn't want them to end up shot - they were people he had pledged to protect. On the other hand, he had a marked aversion to getting shot himself.

'Why would Percival want you dead?' asked the woman. 'You're the only one can catch the psycho, they say.'

'It's not Leary. He's not the killer.'

Tiny was pleading with Johnny. 'Why we even listening? We gotta waste him.'

If only he could get closer to the gun, or get the holder closer to him. 'You could do that,' he said to Tiny. 'You could kill me, easily. You're the man with the power. Where are you going to go when it's done, though? Run to the hills? Hide out for the rest of your life? There's one way this is getting solved and that's if you let me do my job and get this fighting stopped. There's no other option. Or are you going to play the monkey and mouth off all night?'

Fuller's words had their disired effect. Johnny could see it coming but was moving too late. 'Wait!' he yelled.

Tiny was racing up to Fuller, brandishing the gun straight ahead at him. 'You think you're clever, law man -'

Fuller punched him in the face and snatched the gun from his grasp. Tiny dropped to the floor with a thump.

Fuller heard a startled 'Bloody hell!' from behind the two standing workers. How the hell had Sam managed to get round there?

'Bagaa!' Tiny tried to say, undoubtedly shocked and in pain as his teeth dropped out on to the floor.

Sam emerged from the shadows at the back of the warehouse. She nodded expertly.'Yeah, that's right,' she said, 'you don't want to mess with us.' She grimaced at Fuller and he stifled an involuntary laugh.

Johnny jumped. He turned to see just who had crept behind him. The woman clasped his hand.'So, what now?'

Fuller kept glancing up at the rafters. He couldn't help himself. The disappearance of that sack was worrying him. It wasn't there. Of course not. Reminding him of Lily like that.

'Ben?' asked Sam. He dropped his gaze, startled. Sam's blonde hair glowed in the minimal light. He forced himself to concentrate on the situation, keep his voice even, prevent reactive action.

'Sam, the door. As for you two, I think you should take him -' he indicated the spitting Tiny - 'to a doctor as soon as you possibly can. If I remember

my training, he'll have a broken jaw. In the meantime, if you could forget you saw me, I'll forget I saw you. I'll keep this, though.' He waved the gun. 'Illegal firearm. Naughty, naughty. Come on, Sam.'

He saw her turn to the double doors when light flooded the warehouse. Fuller heard the roar of an engine and it seemed at that moment that time was running in slow motion.

The Spanish woman was mouthing,'Oh my God.' The words taking an eternity to spill from her mouth, her long, crimped hair swinging slowly round. Sam diving, hearing something he had missed. The doors crumpling inward, imploding as harsh round lights seared through the jagged gaps.

Two metal eggs launched themselves bouncing and spinning across the warehouse floor, smoke spilling like water in their wake. Gas.

Time reasserted itself. He heard the Spanish woman screaming. Sam was out of sight. The van piled through the doors, helmeted security troops on its roof ducking as the splintered doors burst apart over them. The van looked like some plated iron warhorse from medieval times, steaming nostrils and great glaring searchlights for eyes.

'Stay where you are!' it bellowed, its echo ricocheting round the warehouse.

'Run, Ben! Run!' he could just about hear Sam shouting.

'Shoot! Shoot!' Johnny was yelling, clutching his throat, eyes streaming. The gas pellets had landed right next to him. Tiny, still clutching his mouth, tried to stand but got a mouthful of gas and collapsed, blood oozing from his mouth.

Without thinking, Fuller grasped the panicking Spanish woman's wrist and hauled her away from the scene. He backed away from the piercing gaze of the searchlights. The beams were like worms, concentrated and organic through the gas cloud. He saw one of the troops draw a bead on the choking Johnny as, slowly, he dropped to his knees. The trooper fired. A flash of electricity flew from the gun and walloped into the Johnny's skull. He fell noiselessly into the gas cloud. De Winter, thought Fuller, knowing just how much damage a high-velocity stun charge could do to a human brain. He's going to kill everyone.

Fuller pulled the Spanish woman out to the far side of the warehouse, hoping they hadn't yet been spotted. The black, blank walls offered nothing to them - he just couldn't tell whether there was an exit or not. 'Stay where you are!' barked the loudspeaker.

He felt rather than saw the lights settling in on them and threw the Spanish woman to the ground. Fuller rolled and fired two shots at the van, not caring whether he hit or not.

The woman's eyes gleamed in the dark and at last he saw the way out: a hole in the warehouse wall caused by God knew what, just big enough to crawl through. Electricity pounded through the air sending up a stink of cordite and ozone. He jabbed with his finger for the woman to climb through, heard thephut phut of gas pellets being fired, then was bundling her out of the hole and then the rain was pouring into his gasping mouth.

'Johnny! Johnny!' the Spanish woman was crying as she knelt in the concrete mud.

'Keep moving!' he yelled.'We have to keep moving!'

It was quiet out here, the only noise the rain streaming through the gutters of the alley. Light danced in the smoke through the warehouse windows high above.

'Johnny!' she cried again.

Fuller hauled her up. She slipped in her big boots but he held her steady. 'Listen,' he said, holding the woman's face. 'You've got to get inside, as soon as you can. Find as many as you can and hole up. Try to stay out of their way.'

She spat in his face. 'Pig! You killed them.'

He shook her. 'Just stay out of the way. I'm doing what I can.' She wrested herself from his grasp.

Sam, he was thinking. He had to find Sam. He couldn't let it happen again, allowing events to get out of his control. Someone had to stay free to get to the truth. If someone is doing this to us, he thought despairingly, we're making it easy for them. He would sneak his way round to the main doors. He would kill to get her back.

The Spanish woman was edging away from him.'What can you do, Fuller? What do you think you can do?'

Fuller sneered at her. He checked the rounds remaining in the chamber of the home-made revolver. Three shots. The rain poured into his recently dried uniform. He clicked the weapon closed. Something moved behind the woman. Fuller looked.

It lowered itself, colossal, from the wall. The Spanish woman looked quizzically at Fuller, wondering at his expression. He was frozen, he couldn't move.

Then it plucked her off the street. Fuller watched stunned, the water streaming over him. Her body was tossed, almost contemptuously, up into the air. He heard a single, lost, high-pitched scream, a sound like an ape chittering, and then the body disappeared in a fountain of blood.

Fuller saw himself from far away. He was looking down into this rain-drenched alley, a tiny man barely illuminated by alien stars. He saw, from above, the shadow. Sticks for limbs, a bunch of cloth like a sagging tent and a wide, split mouth like a tear. Black holes in its mirthful eyes.'Fuller,' it spoke in its harsh European voice. 'Would you like to know what we did to Lily? Would you like to know how long it took, how she begged for it to end? "So prahd of you, Ben ". It was funny.'

Galvanised by the voice, unable to differentiate between the rain and his own tears, he raised the revolver. The shadow rustled gleefully. Fuller heard a choked, hysterical giggling.

'Come on then,' he whispered. 'Let's see what you've got.' He managed two shots before it swept over him, the gun flashes lost in the folds of its sackcloth.

Chapter Thirteen
Sushupti

As soon as she heard the news, Helen Percival ordered Rupinder to bring the Doctor up to her office. She didn't care what state he was in - she had one of the conspirators back in her grasp at last.

The situation in the city was getting out of hand. She could see it on the screens. De Winter was going far beyond his remit but she felt powerless to intervene. It was as if someone else was at work, altering her orders in some subtle, undetectable manner. She hadn't wanted pitched battles in the streets of her beloved city. Why were the wires getting crossed? Why didn't the workers just do what they were told?

She didn't want to make a bad situation worse by ordering a retreat. Should she recall the security guards? She did not allow herself to wonder whether she was capable of bringing de Winter back under control. The thought made her hands shake. She had to trust that, once the dust had settled, order would re-establish itself. Perhaps the Doctor could provide the answer to why it all had got so out of hand.

Now that his capture was confirmed, Helen felt a little less vengeful. She had started to feel she was drowning in this command. She liked the idea of someone bearing a White clearance who might help her get the colony back on track. Someone who would reassure her in the correctness of her actions.

Her overriding priority had to be that her status with Earth not be damaged. Her management of the colony must be without blemish. And, you never knew, he might have dealt with Leary like he'd set out to do.

Horton buzzed her to let her know Rupinder was on her way up.

Helen looked at her office for the first time in what felt like days. It was a total mess. Her little alarm systems, the intricate pieces of string and overbalancing pots of pens to trap that person who kept coming in here without her seeing, seemed ludicrous now. What would they think of her? They'd think she'd lost her mind.

Anyway, she thought she'd pinpointed this infiltrator. She kept seeing him on the telescreens, dotted round the city, the red arm band always giving him away. Hadn't got a glimpse of his face yet, though she was

certain he was Oriental. He was always there, on the fringes of de Winter's worst excesses, rallying the workers to fight back, to rebel. She hadn't worked out how he was managing to spy on her in here and be out on the streets so quickly but she had ordered what remained of her security staff to search for hidden passages, secretly constructed when the Installation had been built, probably under Fuller's and Leary's orders.

Reports flooded her terminal: the City Police were turning against de Winter's troops, allying themselves with the traitors. Fuller had been spotted with Jones in a warehouse on the edge of Central. Both had evaded capture. Both were thought wounded.

Helen thought back to her little surprise. The one she had set for Jones in this office. Well, it had confirmed their treachery, even if it hadn't finished her off. Better not to let the Doctor in on that one. He might take it the wrong way. Perhaps she should unravel the traps.

She had done about half when she changed her mind. Helen went out to tell Horton to let the Doctor straight in. She was surprised to see only two of the admin staff at their posts. The office was disturbing in its lack of activity.'Where are they?' she snapped at her secretary, who of course had a telephone at his ear.

Horton had been rubbing his eyes. They were red, swathed in thick purple bags.'Sick; he replied, and was that irritation in his voice? She would have to reprimand him. She was still leader of this colony and deserved respect. 'Helen,' he said cagily. 'What's wrong? People are worried about you.'

'What people?'

Horton sighed and threw down the receiver. 'Forget it.' He stood and picked up his jacket.

Helen couldn't believe it.'Where are you going?'

'A break,' came the desultory reply. Horton nodded to the two others sat at their desks.'Anybody else need a break?'

Without looking at her, the clerks shuffled out after him.

'Horton! Get back here!' she ordered. He didn't even turn.

So this was the way it was. Didn't take long, did it, to separate the wheat from the chaff? It wouldn't be a problem: she could commandeer support staff from other departments easily enough. If Horton thought he was coming back he was very much mistaken. She would relish the challenge, probably should have filtered him out years ago.

She snatched a poster from one of the desks. A little kitten grinned cheekily at her. They had no idea, did they? Thought it would be sooo easy. Well, now they were learning. Wait until they came crawling back to her to sort out the mess. That would be worth waiting for. She crushed the poster and hurled it across the room. It hit a screen and dropped lifelessly on to the carpet.

'Having fun?' came a voice from the doorway.

'Ms Percival? Where is everyone?' asked Rupinder, her dark little face full of worry. Next to her, the Doctor was smiling serenely.

'I thought you had a broken leg,' Helen snapped at him.

The Doctor lifted his right knee and began swinging his kg back and forth, testing its strength. 'Well, there's still a little twinge now and again.'

'It's healed,' said Rupinder. 'It's pointless asking me how.'

'Oh dear,' said the Doctor, limping into the room. 'It's all gone a bit pear-shaped, hasn't it? Annoying, I know. All this people-not-doing-what-they're-told malarkey.'

The old soft soap. A broken leg clearly hadn't changed his disrespect. 'Doctor, don't make me angry.' She needed someone upon whom she could impose her authority. 'I've half a mind to have you shot.'

He screwed up his face as he sat down at Horton's desk. 'I wouldn't do that. Who would you have to sort all this out for you?'

'I'm in control of the situation.'

The Doctor smiled. For anyone else it would have been delightful, charming. For her it just managed to increase the rage. His fingers danced across Horton's terminal. 'Oh dear. Oh dear. You really think so? Your troops on the rampage, workers smashing the city apart. Leary.

Fuller running around making it all worse. You know, I'm not so sure.'

'Doctor,' warned Rupinder, and she was right to do so. She looked as if she was about to burst into tears.

Helen's first thought was to hand him over to de Winter. But she was trained to deal with this, not to let emotion overcome good business sense. Perhaps, just perhaps, he might have some kind of solution. He had White clearance, didn't he? Let him carry the can. See what happened. Just then, she realised how much lighter she would feel if she could lose this big boulder of responsibility from her shoulders.'I suppose you're going to wave your magic wand and make it all better again?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'All right, let's see it.'

He swivelled playfully in his chair to face her. 'First, let me tell you what happened to me.'

'If you think it's relevant.'

'Oh it is.'

She tried to stay calm, tried to ignore that fluttering in her stomach. Despite everything, maybe he could rescue her. He had the security clearance, he had the arrogance. She thought again of Lawrence, of how, in the absolute certainty of defeat, he had won the day for her. Was that the real lesson she had learned from that exercise years ago?

She settled herself down. 'Go on then, impress me.'

In the background, Helen barely registered Rupinder also seating herself, stare locked on this long-haired madman.

'I found Leary,' he said. His eyes shone, recollecting the scene.'In a sewer tunnel in what you call the Central Sector. And, before you ask, you have to believe me when I say that he is not responsible for what has been unleashed on your colony.'

Not that again. 'Doctor,' she snapped, 'I know the theories. I've read the reports. What's keeping you alive is the notion that you have something solid to give me.'

'It's fact,' he said sternly. He obviously didn't like being contradicted.'I never lie.' Then the old smile was back.

'All right; Helen asked,'what is responsible?'

'Something in the mountains. Something very much alive. A creature of some kind.'

'You mean amonster ?' Helen snorted.

'If you like. A native life form. Not the Proximans you know. Something else. Much larger, much more intelligent. Something utterly alien and more powerful than anything the human race has ever encountered.'

This was silly. It sounded like something out of a science-fiction story. 'And Leary told you this?'

'Not exactly. I saw him. Or rather it. It killed Joan Betts.'

Rupinder gasped. Helen had forgotten she was here.'No...'

'And it nearly killed me. Only I managed to fall down a hole and break my leg. When I woke up, the thing had gone. I crawled out of the sewer when one of your ambulances found me and brought me back here.'

'So you didn't get this creature,' said Helen, unable to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

'What do you want, Helen?' the Doctor asked, apparently amazed by her reaction. 'I'm not God.'

'Where - where do you think Jake Leary is? If this monster isn't him?'

The Doctor looked deep into the terminal screen. 'Lying dead somewhere in the mountain I should think.' He raised his eyes to Helen.'Wouldn't you? It would help considerably if I could see the report of the expedition.'

Helen avoided Rupinder's gaze. 'Not possible. The records were burned. We had a fire.'

"That's a shame. It might help me understand just what is out there.'

'Doctor,' asked Rupinder, and for a second Helen thought she was going to blurt out the truth about what had happened in the fire. Not now, she willed, I need this man. "There's something I don't understand.'

'Hmm?'

Rupinder paused for a moment, as if trying to comprehend her own question. 'Well, Leary came back from the expedition. I treated him myself. We have - had - his notebook report. I've got a man in sickbay who says he saw him kill one of our men.'

The Doctor frowned.'What? Where is this man now?'

'Still sedated. She, I mean Ms Percival, thought it for the best that no one should speak to him.'

Damn. She'd forgotten about Sun.What was he going to say about that?

'Very wise. The thing is, Maeve, I don't think you realise just how powerful this enemy of ours is. Just what he or she or it is capable of.'

'Which is?' asked Helen. And here's the big revelation.

'It's a shape-shifter. It has taken on the form of Jake Leary.'

Just for once, Helen was lost for words. She felt hysterical giggles bubbling up inside her. All this... for fairy tales? 'A shape-shifter?' she said sardonically.'You can't be serious.'

'Oh yes. It's not such a rare ability. Many species have developed the capability, either through genetic tampering like the Rutans, or evolutionary development like -'

'This is ridiculous. I won't believe it.' That was it. She was going to have this idiot shot.

'And therein lies your problem,' said the Doctor, seriously. 'You're going to go on not believing it until your colony lies in ruins and all of you are dead.'

'All right Doctor,' said Helen. 'Let's get your story straight here. You're saying that some werewolf looking like Jake Leary is going around killing

off my colonists.'

'Oh no,'replied the Doctor, casual again.'You've got a much worse problem than that. This life form is fantastically resourceful. Way beyond anything I've ever encountered. It doesn't have to take the shape of just Jake Leary. I think that, once it gets a telepathic reading of the memories and emotions of its victim, it can look like anyone it likes,'

'Oh no.'

'And, if you believe that, you should prepare yourself for this. I think there's more than one.'

Helen sighed and relaxed into her chair. 'I might as well hear everything. Go on.'

'I don't think you were supposed to catch it. When it came back from the mountains looking like Leary. I think you interrupted its plans. So this creature -'

'Creatures,' reminded Rupinder.

'Creatures, thank you. They had to engineer its escape. Which means someone helped it to escape. Which means someone here in the Installation was able to let it go free.'

It could be true. It could explain things: that presence she kept feeling in the office for one.

'And who would be the person most able to effect this escape?' asked the Doctor.

Stupid man. Did he think they were children? Helen already knew who this man was. Who it had to be. 'Ben Fuller,' she breathed.

'I think we should find him. And Sam. By the way, where are they?'

'No!' moaned Rupinder, startling them. She looked around as if lost, then fell across a desk in a dead faint, scattering cups and phones everywhere.

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She wasn't going to believe it. Not Ben Fuller, no. No way. The Doctor was wrong.

How could this... thing, how could it be Ben? She had spoken to him, back in the refectory. She had been supplying him with medical supplies for Sam. Why would he be looking after Sam if he wasn't human? What would be the point?

Physically, Rupinder had recovered almost immediately after feinting in the operations office. It was terror that had made her leave their little meeting.

She returned to her room, unable to cope with the demands that her patients would make. Even work was no longer enough to blank out the despair eating away at her.

She sat on her bunk for a while, staring at the picture of Rav holding Sabby. Why had all that had to happen to her? What god thought she was strong enough to cope with it, layer upon layer?

Without knowing why, she reached into her drawer, desperate to ward off these questions somehow. It sat there, wrapped in the green tissue paper, the precious thing she thought she would never wear again.

Rav had mocked her family's ancient beliefs. He was every inch the young lawyer, obsessed with modernity, with trying to pull India out of the radioactive mud-hole it had become. Religion was dead, he had said, it just wouldn't lie down.

Except that once, when he had given her the bracelet. Out of nowhere. She didn't think he even knew what it meant. It had been a hot day. Innocent and sunny in their little polished house. The orange marks on her wrists still told stories of her marriage.

It representedsushupti , she told him as she wound her hands round the bracelet's gold curves. The dreamless sleep, the anticipation of death. A good state, the final blessedness.

Rav had shrugged. He had bought it her because it looked nice, so he said. But she knew better.

And now, light years away, Rupinder wore the bracelet again.

As she walked and sat in the empty refectory, the same strip light still buzzing, she wondered what had happened to her world.

The Doctor had intimated as she helped him into the elevator to Admin that he might have a few surprises for her, that she had to trust him, that whatever he said it was for the good of everyone. But this? This was stretching things. Why was it so important to get into Percival's good books anyway? Her handling of the workers had been frighteningly disastrous, especially now de Winter had been let loose. Morale was nonexistent, the hospital was full to bursting with casualties. Proxima 2 was crying out for her removal. If it hadn't been for her own lack of resolve she would have reported their exec unfit for command. Not that she would have gone.

No, not resolve. Lack of courage. Just when she needed Ben Fuller the most, for the Doctor to turn around and say that.

She was glad she hadn't told him where Ben and Sam were hiding. She almost had, but something, some suspicion, had stopped her. Who was he really? And how was it he had turned up at just this time? If there was some contamination in the Installation, why couldn't it be him?

He was still up there, chatting away to Percival. Working out strategies to get this situation under control. Perhaps it was for the right reasons but it felt wrong, wrong, wrong.

For a moment, Rupinder thought about leaving. Taking her chances and just walking out. Percival had the Installation heavily guarded but there were ways. Through the hospital. Throw in her lot with the workers. There was bound to be plenty she could do.

She didn't even have the courage to do that. She was a useless, empty nobody, ready to do whatever she was told. She scrunched up her empty coffee cup.

'Problems?' asked the Doctor, suddenly sitting opposite her.

Rupinder jumped. 'How did you get there?'

He took her hand. She pulled it from his gentle grip, revolted. He leaned back in the plastic chair. 'Oh, the same mysterious "way in which I repaired my broken leg in four days. Don't ask.'

He looked at her. His gaze was incredible - it went right inside. It reminded her of the way Sabby used to stare: innocent, yet knowing all at the same time. And part of her, the cowardly part, wanted to give up to him, to let him have everything. But the other part, the part that had grown hard as diamond after the fire, refused to allow him through.

'It isn't Ben,' she said, aware that her accent made her sound haughty, petulant even.

'How do you know? You must tell me. I wasn't here then. I don't know.'

'It can't be. Why did you say it was?'

Still, the eyes were chipping away at her.'I didn't. That was Percival. I thought she would say it was you.'

'What?' She was almost shrieking.

'I expected a much more difficult scene.'

Tears were close. She felt an emotion, something like she had felt only with her parents. Hating and... something else. 'Why are you doing this to me? To all of us?'

His voice was calm, trying to be soothing. 'I have to get Percival to pull the colony together. Think of it as surgery. It's going to hurt, perhaps a lot, but it has to be done if the patient is to live. Otherwise, this intelligence. It's going to win everything.'

'Win? Oh, I don't understand. How can you know so much?'

The Doctor leaned back. He looked away. 'I saw it. At the Proximan nest, with Joan Betts. I hooked in to the group mind. It's very complicated... This intelligence - the Proximans call it "Face-Eater" - I think it controls these shape-shifters. It's ancient. Immense. Almost beyond my ability to understand it. I'm extremely worried about Sam. I think I've managed to persuade Percival to get her thugs to do something useful and find her. Get her back here where it's safe.Safer .' He seemed to be lost, caught in the conception of their enemy. 'So, so powerful. We can barely understand it.'

Rupinder scraped her chair back. 'You're right. I don't know. And I don't want to know.'

'Don't go,' he said suddenly. 'I need you.' He glanced down at her arm, indicating her bracelet. 'What's that? It's beautiful.'

She put her hand behind her back. She felt the bracelet's weight on her wrist. 'Something my husband gave me. Back on Earth.'

'Is there a meaning?'

He stood up with her and for the first time she thought he looked tired. As if the casual exterior was masking something with a deadly purpose. Oddly, for the first time, she warmed to him.

'Is it about love?'

Something in his question thawed her. 'You know Percival tried to kill Sam. Put a firebomb in her office.'

The Doctor's expression changed, it kind of iced over. 'I didn't know. I do now. Will you help me?'

Rupinder nodded. 'All right. I've nothing to lose but my pension. What do you need me for?'

'I want to know if we can find a way to detect the shape-shifter. Think back to your examination of Leary. Was there anything odd, anything at all?'

She tried to remember. All she could think of was his size. And the way that wildness in his eyes had disappeared. 'Medically, I can't think offhand. I would have to check his records.'

'I need more. I'm sorry,' he said, apparently genuine. 'We need to find something. Some kind of test. So we can be sure who is and who isn't... changed. I don't want Percival to know you're doing this.'

At last, his words were beginning to add up. 'What do you mean?'

'I don't want to say. Can you just find a quiet place, somewhere you can work without being watched?'

'I could. And if I can't find anything?'

His hands reached for his jacket lapels. 'Then this Face-Eater has pretty much got the better of us I should think.'

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For all her resistance, and the ominous message he had given her, the Doctor had lifted something dark out of her. She felt renewed, energised.

Rupinder wandered through the wards, this time listening to the beds and their very human noises, and realised that she was doing something that might aid both herself and the colony. He had made her feel useful.

The medical report on Jake Leary was still in the filing cabinet in her office. She remembered Fuller and Sam taking a cursory look at it on their visit here but had seemed convinced nothing could be gleaned from it. A statement that now appeared to possess a variety of possible implications. As an afterthought, Rupinder took Fuller's file as well.

She found a cubbyhole in the pathology lab. Not the morgue - she wasn't ready for that - but the little chemical lab tucked away behind it. No one ever came here, except for Dr Nishi, and he was far too busy to be experimenting with test tubes and centrifuges.

Rupinder pinned back her hair and read the report. Nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary anyway. Percival had insisted on a complete medical examination, something for which Rupinder was grateful. Everything tested normal, blood group, DNA, mineral and hydro-levels. Even his fingerprints were the same. If he had been an impostor she couldn't see a way of discovering it.

She rubbed her eyes. After so many nights without sleep, her body decided that it was now that she needed rest. Perhaps it was part of being at peace again.

She read the report once more. And Fuller's. Nothing. This duplicate was perfect, if it was a duplicate. Leary. Some dehydration, excessive adrenaline and corresponding serotonin peaks, perfectly in line with his traumatic experiences. For the life of her she couldn't work out how this made him an alien.

The only thing that kept preying on her mind was his lack of... energy. Again easily understandable. His catatonic responses to the diag computer. As though he had been completely drained of his love of life.

Not enough. This could be explained by the sight of watching your colleagues picked off one by one in a dark cavern.

She read the report again.

Rupinder woke up when her head bumped against the desk. She was still holding Leary's file. How long had she been asleep?

There was a noise in the morgue. No. Too quiet. 'Doctor?' she asked, almost afraid to raise her voice.

Just the noise, familiar but... inappropriate. Its familiarity confused her. What was it?

She replaced the sheaves of paper in the file and walked out into the darkened morgue. Then she realised what she was doing. She flicked on the light, trying to calm down. Perhaps it was the sleep that was feeding her this phantom sound. In the light, she could see that the drawers containing Clark and the others were still shut.

No ghosts, no walking dead. The Doctor had explained what was happening.

Then she realised what the noise was. A baby crying.

It's here, she thought. The shape-shifter. It's come for me. And no one knows where I am.

The black despair was there inside her, welling its way up, but the Doctor had inspired her enough to control it.

OK, she thought, keep calm. Press the alarm. Rupinder walked to the red box by the side of the door that led back to the highly populated wards. Without her hands shaking, feeling scared but not panicked, she grabbed the little hammer and smashed at the plastic glass that covered the alarm button.

Nothing happened. Shards of the glass dropped dully to the floor. The baby still cried.

OK, it doesn't matter. The Face-Eater is not in the morgue. It doesn't know exactly what you can do.You can't let it trap you here.

You're going to have to run past it. No other way. Make a lot of noise.

Realisation came to Rupinder. Why didn't it just come in and kill her?

It didn't want anyone to know. It wasn't as all-powerful as the Doctor had thought. It was afraid.

She pulled away a section of piping from the refrigeration units. It had been loose a long time and she was glad she'd never got round to fixing it. It came free from the wall, one of the few pieces of solid metal in the lab. The pipe was heavy and reassuring in her hand.

Here we go, she thought, feeling the adrenaline exhilarate her. The most alive she'd felt in weeks. Let's see what you can do.

Rupinder threw the door open to the pathology lab. The baby's cry stopped immediately. She switched on the light and saw it lying on the workbench right in the middle of the lab.

It was Sabby. Of course.

Keep going, she insisted. It's a trick. It's not real. The brown baby on the bench stared at her, its mouth moving in that little giggle. It was her baby. Exactly.

'I hate you!' shrieked Rupinder, feeling the tears start to form.'How could you!'

The baby flipped over like a crab. It was gaping at her, blank eyes blinking rapidly. It was so like Sabby. How could it know, how could it know...?

The baby giggled, pointing a fat little finger at her.'Dear sad Maeve,' it said in Rav's voice. 'A Sad Case.'

'Shut up!'

The thought occurred to her. It was so small, she could destroy it now. Smash it. Kill it.

'You could have come with us,' said the baby, still with the voice. 'You could have been at peace. They're in here with me, Sabby and Rav.

Quiet now, but what a noise when the burning began.' The little mouth twisted into a mock regretful grin. 'It was horrible.'

'Shut up!' Rupinder screamed, raised the pipe and charged, lost to all reason.

Only when the baby's hands changed, became gigantic and plucked the pipe from her grasp did she realise how foolish she had been and how she could have got away after all.

Chapter Fourteen
Down on the Streets

She was beginning to think she might as well take up smoking, the amount of cack being poured into her lungs on this planet. She'd got only a mouthful of that tear gas but it had been enough to send her wheezing, choking and spinning out into the streets.

Sam had lost Fuller. Her last sight of him had been gun flashes through a gauze of gas as he had blazed away at the security van.

The bastards had shot the big feller in the head. That was callous, the faceless guard taking his time, just to make sure. As if a staggering, dazed lanky geek right in front of you was any kind of challenge. She hoped there was no permanent damage. She owed her escape from the warehouse to this nameless victim.

She was wandering the streets, staying in the shadows, wondering whether she would ever be dry again. A couple of times she had to stop to vomit. It felt good, despite the stinging in her throat and nostrils. It got all the poison out of her, the gas, the viciousness of the troops, the big man falling. Her back was hurting again.

The city was a wreck, more like Beirut than Benidorm. Somebody, either the workers or the cops, had smashed frontages, doorways, windows. Anything that would break.

Sam found a skip and had spent the rest of the night in it, sheltering from the storm. As she had lain in there in that plastic womb, listening to the rain pound its lid, she wondered where the Doctor was in all this. He had been out of her life for too long. She hoped he hadn't gone back to the Installation.

She had been surprised by Fuller's professionalism in dealing with that monkey with the gun. It revealed a side of him she had never got to know. She had thought he always went round like some kind of long-suffering Richey James. Well, he had been chief of police, so he had to know something about that kind of thing.

'Sam Jones,' she whispered to herself. 'In a million years, you never thought you could find a copper attractive .'What a pain they got separated. She had been spinning round his sun for a long time now.

She owed him a lot.

When the plastic lid of the skip turned a brighter shade of hideous green, she presumed it was day again. She hadn't heard screams or shots or squealing tyres for hours so she guessed everyone had tired themselves out and gone to bed.

She shifted and her back creaked. It would have been rather nice to have some more of that gel stuff - she was itchy as hell. Her clothing squelched as she moved and she realised she had been sleeping in a thin puddle of muddy water. Shivering, she thought: great, a cold on top of everything else. Marvellous.

All right, girl, how much more time do you want to spend putting off just where you are going to go?

This cellar idea was finished. Without Fuller she had no idea where it was. Also, the Doctor would be long gone now. So, short of going back to the TARDIS, that really conspicuous blue box in the middle of miles of open runway, where could she go?

She creaked open the lid of the skip and looked out. Yet another alleyway in yet another street, and all the streets looked the same to her. At least the sun was out, burning away the clouds up through that rectangular gap between the towers.

She half climbed, half fell out of her hotel room. Kneeling, she found herself panting. She felt weak, very weak. Maybe she should try the Installation, find the Doctor somehow and get the hell out of here. She already knew she wasn't in any condition to try anything clever. It might have to be a quick trip to the chemist's, if there was one. She had to get something. A cold might not be the worst thing. It might be final proof that she was clear of those bloody microorganisms.

Ironic, you have to feel bad to feel good. And the worse you feel the better it is. To be honest, she could really have done with a few nanites still inside her, just for now.

Don't. Don't even think it.

Picking herself up, Sam stumbled along the alley, blinking in the morning sunlight. After some indeterminate wandering, she found herself back at the warehouse from the night before. She knew it was the warehouse

because the doors had been smashed inward. There was no one around. Just a few empty gas canisters lying dead on the floor.

Ben, where are you? she found herself thinking. I can't do this on my own.

The cops hadn't searched that thoroughly, their rucksack was still tucked behind the crates where they'd left it. Ravenous, Sam pulled it open and thanked heaven that some dried-up excuse for food was still inside, along with a bottle of water. It was only dried fruit and yoghurt but it tasted like fresh strawberries and champagne to her.

She felt a billion times better. Not only because of the food. A plan of action came to her: she had to find Ben. He had to be somewhere. She had the warm feeling that he would be looking for her.

Sam started by circuiting the warehouse. Puddles of rainwater lay dotted like blemishes in the cracked pavements. Sidewalks, they probably called them here. The sun was refreshing and at last this stupid uniform was starting to get dry.

Up to now she hadn't seen a living soul. She had the impression that she was the only person left in this silent, concrete city. Without people, Proxima 2 was absolutely still, the only sound now the dripping cascades of water finding their way to the ground down gutters and fire exits. Where could Ben have got to?

The sound of an engine broke into her thoughts. She had drifted right away. Oh God, she wasn't getting a fever, was she? Hide!

She ducked behind the usual flotsam of pallets and concrete moulds. A patrol car slowly purred into view. Not one of the Installation vans, but a cop car, like Ben's.

The car braked and halted right in front of her. She ducked down. Through gaps in the pallets she watched the driver emerge. She couldn't see his face, not enough of a gap for that.

What could she do? What were her options if she was caught? It might be the best thing for her. Risk it, and hope the Doctor was there to keep Percival at bay.'Risk' was right. Too much risk. But how long was she going to last like this? She was almost certain a fever was coming. Her head was beginning to feel as if someone was taking a vice to it. And

she felt sick again.

The driver scraped his boots on the ground. He lowered his head and Sam breathed out with relief. He was wearing a stetson. From the car a distorted voice was crackling.

She had no choice. She needed help.

'Jeffries,' she tried to shout. It sounded more like someone scraping an emery board.

'Sam?' he drawled. It came out more like 'Sayum?' She smiled. 'Ah bin looking all over for you.'

He pulled the sunglasses from his eyes and helped her into the now familiar squad car. 'Better get moving,' he said. 'It's quiet but patrols are still going round. I guess I've been relieved of duty.'

Within minutes she was watching the city rooftops pass by as she lay, trying to hide, in the back seat. The upholstery was warm and pungent after the night of frozen rain.

'I... I lost Ben,' she said softly, her teeth chattering. 'Security... whatever...'

'No problem,' Jeffries replied. 'We gonna get you warm. This city's getting to be a real dangerous place.'

The warmth was too much. Sam felt herself falling into a doze.'Where are we going?' she asked sleepily.

'The Chief. He looks worse than you do. Reckons he got into a fight with some alien thing. Damn near chewed his head off.'

Blackness was starting to overwhelm her. The knowledge that Ben was OK was like drinking a bowl of soup in winter, it sent warm tingles throughout her body. She was nothing but a receptor for sensations: the movement of the car, the smell of the seats, the daylight and shadow passing hypnotically over her, she was all feeling. And then she felt nothing at all.

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A sudden movement jolted her awake. The car was braking. It was still daylight. How long had she been asleep? She felt hot, ridiculously hot, sweat breaking in beads over her face. The fever, she managed to reason. Her ears felt as if they'd been stuffed with cotton wool.

Jeffries was turning back to her, seat creaking with his weight.'He's in here. Say, you OK?'

Sam nodded feebly. She didn't feel at all OK, but what was the point in saying it? She wasn't going to be one of those people who said flu when they meant cold. 'You coming with me?' she asked.

'Sure, if you want. I got a few things to do, for the Chief, but you look pretty done in.'

'Thanks. I don't know how good my legs are going to be.'

'No problem. Chief wants you safe. I reckon he's the only sane man on this planet. If I'm gonna obey orders, might as well be his.'

He unclipped himself and pulled open the door. He had to practically drag her out of the car. 'Sorry, sorry,' she kept saying.

'No problem. Just lean on me.'

Through her boiling vision she could see they were much closer to the mountains. The air was drier, less stuffed up with the garbage from the city. The building to which he was leading her was another coffin, an empty shell.

'Hey,' she asked suddenly, the thought just occurring to her. 'Did you ever sort that thing out with your brother?'

Jeffries was red-faced, trying not to show how much effort it was taking to keep her on her feet. He was hauling her bodily towards the building. 'Oh yeah,' he huffed. 'I got it all sorted.'

'Look, Deputy,' she said, embarrassed at all this work he was putting in for her benefit. 'I think I can walk. Don't worry.'

He straightened.'Guess I ain't the man I used to be. If I was ten years younger, you'd have to watch out for me.' His smile was bright against his plum face.

'Yeah, right.'

She tried walking. She was a little unsteady and she felt as if someone had taken a hose pipe to her knees, but she was strong enough to get inside. She sneezed and staggered up through the doors. It was cold in here. She felt that the eternal crisscrossing from hot to cold to hot must have been as much responsible for her fever as anything else. Dusty footsteps traced a trail on the dark floor tiles to a door up ahead. She was wheezing like a grandmother. How much more time would she need in bed? For nearly the whole time she had known Ben he had been acting like her private nurse. Not a bad nurse, though.

'Which way?' she asked Jeffries.

Turning round, she saw that Jeffries had gone. Through the smeary entrance windows, the car waited placidly. 'Deputy Jeffries?'

Something hot crawled up inside her. The air seemed to shimmer, like in a heat haze.

What had she done? Oh no.

'Get out!' shouted Jeffries from outside.

There was a scurry of movement as something that looked like a monkey raced past the doorway, chased by the corpulent deputy. Sam screamed.

Jeffries entered the building at a run. He looked around, panicked.'Jesus,' he gabbled,'you scared me.'

Sam put a hand on his shoulder, leaning on him as she started to laugh breathily.I scaredyou ? What were you doing?'

'Wa'nt nothing. Just them Rats.'

'Sam. You made it. Thank god,' came a voice from the gloom.

It was Ben, bandage on his head, emerging from the doorway where the footsteps led. If only her own head would stop pounding. She needed time to think. Sounds and light and smells seemed amplified, as if someone had turned up the controls on a telly.

Apart from the bandage, Ben looked healthy. Happy even.

She hoped it was to do with seeing her again.

'Ben, excuse me if I don't rush to embrace you. I don't think you want my cold.'

He laughed, winking at Jeffries. 'Thanks. Again, I owe you one.'

'No problem Chief,'Jeffries mumbled.'I reckon we need to get the lady a seat.'

'Of course.'

Ben walked to the main desk and wheeled the receptionist's chair round for her. 'You look terrible,' he said brightly.

Sam slumped herself down in it. 'Whereas you look on top of the world. What happened? What's this about monsters?'

He parked himself on the desk, obviously pleased to see her. 'You are looking at the man who might just have sorted out this colony's problems.'

Jeffries' boots scraped on the floor'I guess I'd better go and get that stuff you wanted. You want I should report in to the Installation? Tell them what you found?'

'Better wait until Sam's seen it. Come back in half an hour. Should have it all fixed by then.'

'OK.' He turned to go, then turned back. He smiled at Sam. 'Won't be long now,' he said.

'Thanks. Again,' she replied. Ben had a good man there. The best. She realised she didn't even know his first name.

The deputy hoisted his trousers and marched out of the building. 'Tell me, then,' said Sam. 'What's going on?'

'It's easier if you see for yourself.'

'Come on, Ben. I don't like surprises. The last time I saw you you were dodging a security van, halfway to getting yourself shot. What is it?'

Ben looked down. He sighed with mock solemnity - the air of the long-suffering martyr. 'All right. Look, something attacked me last night. After I got out of the warehouse. It killed that woman who had come in with us. Damn near took me too. I managed to kill it, not before it had taken a chunk out of my head, though.'

'What sort of thing?'

He was smiling again. 'Well, that's the thing. It's not Leary. It's something else. Something that lives out there.' He waved his hand vaguely out through the door.'I mean, it was tough. I thought it was hideous at first. But, when I killed it, I realised it was just defending its home. You know. We're the aliens here. It's not our planet. When you see it you'll tfiink it's ugly, a monster. But it isn't at all. Actually, it's rather wonderful. Noble.'

The fever was doing its job in her brain. She couldn't seem to comprehend what he was telling her. 'Yeah, but you killed it, right?'

'Sam. Listen. You remember when I first met you, you were saying all that stuff about exploitation and the rape of the planet. Well, you were right. All this creature wants to do is hold on to what belongs to it. Not to let us spoil it all. That's why you should see it.You'll understand that it... it's perfect.'

'Oh Ben,' said Sam softly, at last realising the truth. 'You poor man.You didn't get it: it got you.Whatever you are.You killed him.'

There was an embarrassed pause, as if Ben hadn't quite heard. She felt a buzzing, tension or something, humming in the air. Her cold-filled head or something else? She was warm, too warm.

'Sam, what are you saying?' His dark eyes were quizzical. 'Come with me. I'll show you what happened.'

She tried to stand, keeping her eyes locked on his. Her heart was beating blocks of ice against her chest. 'You scumbag.You killed Ben, didn't you? And now you want me.

Except you're not man enough to do it out here. You want me in the dark where no one can see you.'

'Sam...'

'Shut up. You want to try for me, do you? Well, you can do it out here, in the light. If you think you've got what it takes.'

Her legs were like glass, ready to shatter. All she was trying to think of was whether she had heard the car engine. Whether Jeffries had gone. Unless, of course, he was one of them, too, in which case she was finished. Keep him talking, keep him talking. It wasn't only the fever that was making her teeth chatter. "Think you can catch me? A girl with a cold and burns on her back? Think you're man enough for that?'

He pushed himself off the desk.'This is a mistake. What are you doing?'

She was backing away to the light outside. Her throat and nostrils and lungs were stinging, constricted, choking her. 'Beautiful, huh? Then why do you have to hide? What sort of noble creature sets pathetic traps like this?'

She turned and caught a glimpse of sprawled legs stuffed into the shadows. Dead security troops. Percival must have put a guard on the tower.

'You've got it all wrong.' The smile was gone now, and she could see behind its Ben facade the passionless glare of the creature that lived inside. Cold, cruel and vengeful.

'Come on then, brave boy. Show yourself:

Ben smirked humourlessly. The voice was the same but thankfully there was nothing of him in it. 'I will crush your little race,' he said calmly. 'I will watch you all die. Who do you think you are, compared to me? I am endless.'

She could feel the hot air on her back now. Had she heard that car or not? 'I'm still waiting,' she said. 'Your trouble is you're all mouth.'

'You'll see what I am,' it said icily. Then he roared. A sound so big and vast and cold it knocked Sam to her knees. Ben changed.

Sam turned her head away to see Jeffries' shaking hand pointing his stun gun into the building. 'Get to the car,' he said hurriedly.'Call

dispatch.West Eighteenth. Run!'

The creature roared again. She saw Jeffries' eyes widen and he pushed her out of the way with his free hand. She rolled out of the doorway. The deputy fired once, twice, then something huge like scabrous sticks laced around his head and yanked him into the building. It must have been him squealing because the roar never ceased. The sounds became unbearable.

Sam winced, trying to blot out the noise, trying to find the energy to move. She started to pull herself to her feet. Something bobbed up in front of her. She fell back, too shocked to scream. A Proximan native sat up on its hind legs, teeth bared, eyes wide fixed on her. Sam felt her mouth wobbling, eyes barely focusing on the thing.

'F'Seeta,' it said and its head jerked. The screams and roars inside were subsiding. She didn't have much time.

Get to the car, pray Jeffries has left it unlocked.

Something very large was scraping towards her. She didn't look.

The Proximan leapt at her. Sam tried to raise her arms to stop it but the little monkey thing was all over her, knocking her down the stone steps of the entrance. She felt its claw grip her neck and all the feeling went from her body. It had paralysed her. She felt fright like a cold icy spoon run up her spine. There was nothing she could do. It had a grip on some kind of nerve because she just couldn't move a bloody muscle. The native squatted over her, completely still, its sour, lemon breath puffing over her face. Please, she found herself trying to mouth, please, not like this. Not like Ben.

She heard a rustle of something, wings. Bloodied hands like dry sticks scraped her face, a black membrane of stretched skin blotted out the sky. The molten remains of Ben Fuller's mad face shuffled over her, caked in fragments of Jeffries. A forked tongue darted in and out. No good. She was spent.

Unbelievably, it moved away, its obscene head darting this way and that, limbs stretching out blindly, as if finding its way through a darkened room. The Proximan's grip pinched relentlessly.

The creature, the shape-shifter, tottered past, towards the squad car.

The flapping membrane seemed immense, like a cape. Why hadn't it attacked her now she was helpless? What was the Proximan doing? She heard sticky clicking noises from the shape-shifter's throat.

The pinch ceased abruptly, as if a switch had been flicked. Sensation flooded Sam's limbs. The Proximan native jumped off her and on to the shape-shifter's back.

The monster screeched in pain. It folded back on itself, limbs forking unnaturally over its own back as it tore at the furry little bundle biting away at it. It rolled on to the dusty road, thrashing at the Proximan with a fury that sped as fast as a wasp's wings. And the noise... it was screaming in pain.

Not caring that she really didn't have the strength for this kind of thing, Sam hauled herself up and belted towards the car.

She hit the driver's door, rammed it, panting. It opened, maddeningly slowly. She was starting to lose it, disorientation, sickness, shock, the works. But not yet, not yet.

She fell into the driving seat and slammed the door shut, wondering how many more allies would appear to get themselves destroyed over her. She'd better get away - she'd never forgive herself if she didn't.

No gears, no ignition, just a red button on the dashboard. She pressed it. The car coughed into life. She realised her nose was streaming. Her breath was steaming up the interior.

Something bounced on to the bonnet. The Proximan, bloodied but alive. It stared at her triumphantly, screeching in triumph. 'Rroouuunnnddd!' It yelled and was off. Just as the thin limbs of the shape-shifter skittered over the bonnet where it had been.

Sam floored the accelerator. Fasten your seat belts, she mused insanely. The squad car rocketed forward. The shape-shifter hammered into the windscreen, cracking the plastic. Then it was up and over the roof (and Sam stifled a hysterical giggle: it was just like some macabre roller in a car wash), the sound of its scrabbling claws jangling Sam's nerves. 'You really are ugly!' she yelled, trying to work out where she was supposed to be going. The speedometer read 120. She presumed that was k.p.h., otherwise this car had one hell of an acceleration.

Up ahead, she saw the access junction to the ring-road flyover. A couple of the giant wagons were rolling placidly along like cattle. She looked in the mirror and her hand involuntarily jerked the steering wheel. The shape-shifter was climbing its way over the rear window. There didn't seem to be anything of it: it was like a kite, just the membrane and long thin bones. Sam could just make out its screeching, glad that the wind would be taking most of it the other way. It drew back a claw and punched in the rear window.

There was a huge bump as the car hit the wall of the access junction. It slid up and on to the three-lane link road. A wagon blatted its horn as, out of control, the car slewed right in front of it. Sam twisted the steering wheel and the wagon roared past, the driver's arm offering her an unmistakable gesture. 'I thought you were all on strike,' said Sam, gritting her teeth, trying to straighten this bloody vehicle up. A quick glance in the rear-view mirror told her that the shape-shifter must have been thrown off from its position, for it was no longer reaching into the car. But it was crawling back, now, limbs stabbing into the roof and boot. Sam kept her foot firmly on the accelerator. How was she going to get rid of this thing?

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Commander de Winter was back on duty. He had enjoyed last night. He believed he had proved his point to Percival. The scum were hiding out today, locked cowering inside their apartments. The ones that were in one piece anyway. Twenty-two dead. He had slept well. Pretty soon he would be ready, he thought, to go back to the Installation and do the right thing. Which was to get that Indian doctor - what was her name? - to pronounce Percival unfit for command and take over the running of the Proxima Colony himself. He would get the trains running on time.

'Commander! Commander!' his lieutenant was shouting as he emerged blinking from the back of his command van. He breathed in deeply. The air was fresh after the night's rain. They were parked up in one of the plazas in Central - his base of operations - right in the thick of it. Just how he liked it to be. He strapped on his helmet as his subordinate homed in.

'Calm down,meneer ', said de Winter. He was feeling magnanimous.'What's the problem?'

The lieutenant, a hand-picked Colombian called Torres, held up a road

map.'Report from our men on West patrol. We got a stolen cop car, sir. Ring road. We think it's the girl Jones.'

Jones. Oh yes. The one Percival wanted bringing in. He wondered why. All right, he would get her. And then maybe hand her over. 'What are we waiting for? Get the roadblocks set up. Tell them we're on our way.'

This was new - he hadn't done a road block before. Should be exciting.

De Winter ran to his command van and slammed the side. 'Let's go! Western ring road.'

Within five minutes they were there. The command van skidded to a halt. De Winter thanked Torres for getting them there in record time.

His men had already cordoned off the slip road and were shaking down a couple of wagons and their drivers. It was good they had returned to work so quickly. A squad was filing into position behind the roadblock, loading its stun guns. Full charge should bring down that vehicle, even if Jones foolishly tried to crash through.

'What's the situation?' he barked at the helmeted sergeant in charge. De Winter could just see the man's thick moustache through the face shield.

'The vehicle seems totally out of control, sir,' he replied.'It's not stopping for anything. Got some kind of black sheet on it. Possibly camouflage.'

'Don't worry,' said de Winter. 'It'll stop for us. Do whatever it takes, Sergeant. Carry on.'

Good words, he thought. Should remember those for some other time.

The sergeant dashed back to the roadblock, clumsy in his body armour.

De Winter pulled off his gloves. His hands were sweaty again. He hoped it would be a good show. He slid the door open on the command van and stood half in, half out of the cab in what he thought an appropriate heroic pose. He picked up the mike for the loudspeaker. It was wet in his grasp. 'Do your duty, men!' he yelled. Snaps filled the air as the stun guns began to charge up.

De Winter heard the car before he saw it. Tyres squealing on the road. It really was out of control. And then there it was, coming round the curve,

the tan-and-white squad car and... What was that thing hanging off the roof? Looked like a big black bat pummelling the vehicle. He could see the dents and rips from here.

'Ready, men,' he bellowed into the mike, making one or two of them jump. De Winter watched a trooper wipe his mouth.

Quicker than he would have thought possible, the squad car was on them. It wasn't slowing down. For a moment, just a moment, de Winter had second thoughts about their capability to stop it. Don't be silly, he thought. It's just a car.

The men behind the roadblock fired. The car skidded sideways as electric bolts hammered into it. The plastic shell jumped and melted in the mini-explosions. De Winter caught a brief glimpse of the driver ducking down as something that looked like a bag of giant twigs shattered the windscreen. With a shriek of rubber the car twisted sideways and hammered into the roadblock, scattering his men, punching right through the barricades.

It was heading straight for him, slowing but not enough. Utterly panicked, all de Winter could think of to do was slide the door shut. He stared into cold, malignant eyes.'Get out of here,' he screamed as the car, with an explosion of barriers framing its front end, cannoned into the command van. De Winter gripped the dashboard and shrieked. He felt himself lifted into the air, the impact snapping his head back in its helmet. He hit the roof and found he was heading for the floor at speed. Something, some metal, was grinding deafeningly in his ear. Then it was all over.

He lay on his back for a second, staring at the ceiling. The crash had sent the van tumbling on to its side. He was lying on Torres, whose head was rolling unnaturally, eyes wide and staring. His command van! Someone was going to pay for this. Heads would roll.

De Winter slid the door above him open. He hoisted himself up. Blood was streaming into his eyes. There was a rustle, like sacking, then the creature rose in front of him. He stared into its black eyes uncomprehendingly. It kept jerking, shattered limbs unable to support its torn membrane. Then it jumped.

It snapped out a broken, trailing limb which, almost as an afterthought, snicked the security commander's head from his body. De Winter saw the world bouncing stupidly over and over. For a second.

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The sergeant picked himself up off the tarmac and stared disbelievingly at the parapet over which the creature had just dropped. There were pieces of it lying all over the road, a line of some thin, grey liquid following its passage to the parapet.What the hell was that?

The squad car had squashed itself into the overturned base of the command van. Steam or smoke or something was spiralling lazily from its crushed bonnet. Good thing they weren't gas-driven any more, or they would have all been fried. Commander de Winter's arms stuck out rigidly from the upturned door.

Around the sergeant, he sensed his troops slowly gathering their wits. One woman was unbuckling her helmet. 'Didn't stop...' she was saying over and over.'It just wasn't going to stop...'

The sergeant threw down his gun and ran to the car. The roof had been peeled open like a can of beans. He climbed up on to the bonnet and peered in. The girl was alive. Semiconscious, covered in blood, moaning inanely, but alive.

Behind him, he heard his troops trying to deal with the situation. 'What was that thing?'

'Took his head right off.'

'What if it comes back?'

'No, not a man. Can't you see that?'

He reached in and touched the girl's hair. She looked up, eyes glazed and distant but triumphant too.'I got you. I know I did,' she said, dazedly.

The sergeant pulled himself out of the wreck. This was going to be a very bad day. He waved at his squad frantically, desperate for something that would regain his equilibrium. 'Get an ambulance!' he bellowed.

Chapter Fifteen
Funhouse

The Doctor didn't want anyone to visit Sam. He didn't say why but everyone seemed to have a pretty good idea. Percival, shaken by the report from the ring road, readily agreed to his request. Which was good.

The Colony Exec seemed beaten, lost. Her world had collapsed beneath her. She would be suffering tremendous dislocation at having her carefully constructed view of reality utterly disrupted. She was suffering paranoid delusions, feeling that someone was watching her, judging her. Not an atypical response in an authoritarian mind, part of the need for approval, the delusion of a higher power to whom she could appeal. There could be no doubt now that the Face-Eater was loose in the city and, after the discovery of Rupinder's body, the Installation.

'I suppose... suppose I should recall the security troops,' Percival said falteringly, as they sat in her office deconstructing the car crash.

'No,' he told her.'I think that would be a mistake.'

Percival looked up at him, uncomprehending. 'But there's no need... no need...'

The Doctor shook his head. 'We need to keep the workers in their buildings. If they start wandering the city again we'll never find the shape-shifter.'

Percival turned away from him, staring intently at the telescreens. She couldn't seem to keep still. 'It's winning, Doctor. How can we stop it?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I don't know. There must be a way. Somehow.'

Percival turned to him.'What about retracing Leary's steps, following his expedition. Maybe there's something in the mountains?'

'Later perhaps. Our first priority has to be locating the creatures in among us. Until we've found them, all our efforts are going to be undermined. If only Dr Rupinder had been able to complete her tests.'

Percival drummed her fingers nervously on her desk. She scanned the room quickly, as if looking for something. 'How does it know? How does

it know what we're doing?'

'Perhaps Sam can tell us,' he replied, trying to gauge the extent of her neurosis, wondering how much longer it would be before she suffered a total mental collapse. "The Face-Eater, it's clever, intelligent and adaptable. I don't think it's going to make many mistakes. Sam found a way to unmask it. She could be the key. You know, I rather like her.'

'Hmm,' snuffled Percival.

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Time was running out for the colonists. It wouldn't be long before Percival caved in completely. He had a lot of work to do.

The Doctor checked up on Sam's condition. Nishi, the physician now in charge of the colony hospital, was a tiny middle-aged Japanese man. He was obviously more used to spending his time dealing with practical medical matters, so the burden of command was taking its toll. He was always running around, failing to delegate correctly and consequently being rushed into decisions that in the long run would create more problems for him. The Doctor had had to corner the little man and force him to put Sam in isolation, with a guard on the door.

He reached Sam's little room and noticed with a smile the plate on the door that said, DANGER: INFECTIOUS DISEASES. Irony. An interesting concept.

'What's happening up there, sir?' asked the guard, a middle-aged black man. He seemed tired, slapping the stun gun in his palm.

'Oh, everything's under control,' replied the Doctor. 'I'm sure everything will be finished soon.'

And if you believe that, he mused, you're a better man than I. He pushed open the door and strolled in.

Sam lay in the bed, hooked up to the machine that was feeding her its precise medication. The Doctor saw little but her mop of dirty blonde hair and two panda eyes caused by hammering her face into the dashboard.

Good. She was recovering quickly. He walked to the bed, his hands brushing the chart hanging from the rail by her covered feet. Picking it

up, he made out a list of ailments that read like a shopping list: viral infection, broken nose, lacerations of the head and body, fever, third-degree burns on the back (almost cured), blood loss. Nothing serious, not for this day and age. Unless there were complications she should make a full recovery.

Physically, at least.

One thing this colony did have was superb medical facilities. Still, there were one or two conditions beyond its means, the separation of the head from its spinal column being one of them. He had watched impassively as they had carried out what was left of de Winter from the ambulance in which it had accompanied Sam.

All she needed was a long rest while the drugs and gel packs did their work. Rest he wasn't going to allow her to have. He put his face up to the diagnostic computer and studied the red and green lights measuring her. After a few seconds he tweaked a rubber button, adding a stimulant to the flow it was introducing into her body.

Then he sat down to wait.

He squinted at the paraphernalia in the room. Bed, chart, diag comp, water cooler. So much invention for the upkeep and maintenance of the body. The Time Lord regeneration process was so much less inconvenient, despite the somewhat wayward regularity in which it operated. The human shell was a fragile, temporary thing in comparison. It never ceased to amaze him how it survived so well. There were so many ways that Sam could have died.

Her breathing was increasing, and a slight moan introduced itself into the unconscious whispers. The Doctor checked the diag comp. No complications. Excellent.

He checked the pulse in her wrist, not willing to put his entire trust in a machine. Slightly fast, nothing problematic.

He sat down again, waiting for her to emerge from sleep. Eventually, her eyelids began to flutter inside their purple circles. They opened up, revealing the blurred pupils, dilated and rucked up under the eye socket. Another minute and she knew where she was. Her breathing increased beneath the bed covers and she looked around, perhaps panicked by her surroundings. When she saw him, she smiled and wiggled her nose.

He smiled back. 'Welcome to the land of the living, Samantha Jones.'

'Agg... cack...' she spluttered. Of course, water. She must be dehydrated. He walked to the cooler and filled a paper beaker. She tried to raise her arm to hold the cup but he shook his head. She lay back and he touched it to her pale lips. She drank greedily.

He let her lie for a while, to allow the memory to click back in.'How do you feel?' he asked at last.

'Battered and pulped,' she replied. 'Like I've just gone two minutes in a magi-mix.'

'You're going to be just fine.'

'I wondered where you'd gone. Thought you'd got lost. Distracted investigating a mineral sample or something.'

'No,' he replied.'I think I met the same fellow that you did.'

She turned slightly to get a view of him. 'Are you sure? You look great. Oops. Sorry. I mean, no fatal injuries.'

'I broke my leg, if that cheers you up.'

'Doctor,' she said, suddenly serious. 'It killed Ben.'

The Doctor stood up and gently touched her hand.'I know. I'm sorry.'

Tears were forming in her eyes. Delayed shock. Grief. She needed to be left alone. There wasn't time.

'Sam,' he whispered, 'I'm sorry I woke you up. You need rest. Time to heal. But we need help. I've given orders for you not to be disturbed. Someone here isn't who they're supposed to be. You see, Ben isn't the only one. There have been others. I think only you know how to unmask them.'

She pressed her head back into the pillow.'Me? How?'

'You made it reveal itself. I don't think they like that. Perhaps when they change they're more vulnerable.'

Sam snickered. 'Vulnerable? Doctor, you should have seen it. Like Batman on acid.'

'What did you do? You must have found something.'

He watched her trying to concentrate. Her eyes kept rolling, he didn't have much time.'I don't know,' she said.'But I think I know where it came from. It lives in the mountains. I think Leary woke it up when he went there. I got the file, out of the office. Percival was covering it all up.'

He placed his hands on her face to calm her down. 'Sam, Sam. You might be right but there isn't time just now. What did you see when it attacked you?'

She was drifting away, angry with her mind for starting to cloud over.'I don't remember. I didn't do anything. It... it was smug, arrogant. It thought it could get me to... to...'

Sam yawned and winced in pain. She was half conscious now. The Doctor shook her, trying to drain every last drop of information out of her. 'Sam! There has to be something. Sam!'

She went limp.'Sam!' he shouted at her.

The door opened behind him. He swung round, the sleeping woman still in his arms. The guard stood there, looking scared.'Is everything OK?'he asked.

The Doctor let go of Sam and stood up. 'Everything's fine,' he snapped, brushing past the guard as he left the room.

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When he returned to Admin, he found it was no longer deserted. Steve Horton was sitting alone at his workstation, yelling into the phone. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, stained with sweat.

As the Doctor closed the door Horton snapped up, obviously surprised. He raised a shaking hand that held a stun gun. The reflections of the strip lights made his moist forehead shine.

'Hello, Mr Horton,' he said brightly. 'I thought you were long gone.'

The gun was not lowered. 'That's far enough.'

'Where's Percival?'

'I don't know. Not in there.' He indicated her office, his gaze not leaving the Doctor.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Couldn't sleep. Bad dreams,' said Horton. "Thought I'd try to make myself useful. Look up some psych-profiles on the Net. See if I can find anything.'

'And have you?' asked the Doctor.

'What?'

'Found anything?'

Horton glanced down at his screen. 'Possibly. I can't see anything wrong with the colonists.'

'So nothing.' The Doctor felt himself becoming impatient.

'Well,' said Horton confidently. 'There's you. Funny how you turned up just at the right time. Howdid you get here?'

The Doctor strode over to the secretary. He didn't have time for this. 'Mr Horton, we have a lot to do and I'm afraid that this kind of behaviour really doesn't help anyone. Do you really want ten good reasons why I'm not a monster or shall we get on with the work that needs doing?'

'Stay back!'

The Doctor reached him, just as the stun gun was jabbed into his forehead. 'Horrttonn,' he said spookily. 'If I am the creature, do you think I would let you live?'

Quicker than Horton could react, he plucked the gun from Horton's hand and tossed it aside. 'Rampant paranoia never helps in these situations.'

Horton looked foolishly at the discarded weapon. 'You mean... you've

done this before?'

The Doctor sniffed.'More often than you'd think. Now, shall we try to find out what Percival's up to?'

Horton nodded blankly. The Doctor strode up to Percival's office. Before going in, he turned back.'By the way... You say you're having bad dreams?'

'Uh huh.'

'What sort of bad dreams?'

Horton sat down. 'I don't know. Stupid I guess.'

'Go on, I'm interested. I really am.'

The secretary stared ahead. For the first time, the Doctor noticed that Horton's accent had slipped. No longer this transatlantic monstrosity they all seemed to use round here. Something of his old Caribbean roots had returned. It made him seem more... honest somehow.

'Like the stories my granddaddy told me as a kid. Back on Earth. Voodoo I suppose you'd call it. Load of old codswallop.' The word jarred on the Doctor's ears. Strange and old-fashioned.

'Voodoo,' said the Doctor. 'Oh yes.'

'I dreamed that I'm out in the city, only I'm on my own. It's day. Hot sun. Too bright. I'm trying to find something, somewhere to hide because I know they're coming.'

'They?'

'They're here, on Proxima, hiding. Coining to claim me. I try to find cover when they start to moan. The whole city moaning. I can hear their footsteps, so loud. I try to run but they're coming at me, every street, every place.'

'What happens in the end?'

'I see them, all rotten, just... slow, you know. Slow. The walking dead. Come back. Then they're on me and I wake up. Lord, I'm shouting so

much I feel I'm going to bust my lungs. And for a few seconds I know, I know. The dead, they're here and they're coming for me.'

The Doctor looked at him sympathetically. "That's a bad dream.'

Horton leaned back in his chair, perhaps trying to shake off the visions. 'It's a killer, man. A real killer.'

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He waited in the office for Percival. Her absence seemed somehow resonant. The first time he had ever known her not to be here. Was it a symbol of the fragmenting colony? He sat in the chair watching the city going by on the telescreens. He couldn't see very much. Over half the cameras appeared to have been knocked out and great gaps had appeared in the wall of screens, like missing teeth. The remaining images of concrete and wreckage seemed almost serene in the flickering black and white and grey.

The city streets were devoid of life, the bold citizens of Proxima 2 deciding to stay at home today. The Doctor wondered how many of them now knew that the Face-Eater had insinuated its way into their lives, stealing their identities. Undetectable, merciless, unstoppable. He swung away from the screens and saw too late that he had inadvertently yanked a piece of string tied to the chair. A line of coffee mugs crashed to the ground off a shelf. One of Percival's intruder traps. Now he looked, the office was dotted with them.

He realised just how far she must have gone, sitting in here watching the carnage on the screens, feeling how every second events were spiralling further and further out of her control.

Where was she? If she wasn't in her office, she had to be up to something. Her absence made him uneasy. He thought about going off to find her. Not his first choice. Did he really want to run into Percival on his own in the dingy lower depths of the Installation?

Also, he had the feeling that the level of paranoia was increasing. They knew Face-Eater had a presence here in the Installation, that someone was not who they claimed to be. His little chat with Horton proved that. He didn't want to put himself under more suspicion by skulking round not telling anyone what he was up to.

He would have to wait, there was no choice. It gave him time. And time was what he was supposed to be good at.

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The guard was no trouble. He seemed grateful that someone was here to tell him what to do. Percival was just grateful there was still someone here who understood their duty. He had looked smart and menacing under his helmet and face shield, like an Installation guard was supposed to. Not running around the city massacring colonists. She would concede that one to the authorities. De Winter had been a mistake. She shouldn't have fought so hard against them for him.

Despite what the Doctor had said, she needed to get to the girl. She would figure prominently in her plans. Helen had been watching this corridor for half an hour, wondering if her spy was going to be following her. No familiar tingle, no sense of being watched. Nobody about.

The guard stepped aside. Helen Percival opened the door and walked into the Isolation room. Sam was lying there, drips and sensors still attached to her body. She seemed to be unconscious.

Helen kept her eyes on Sam as she shut the door and flipped the lock. She didn't want anybody disturbing them.

She walked to the bed. The diag comp was beeping away, the spiking LEDs showing her condition stabilising. Helen was no medic but she could see that the plastic template over her face had almost completely melted into the skin. The bruises around her eyes were already fading. There was a red mark on her nose where Nishi must have reset the cartilage. Only her pale cheeks and lips gave any indication of the trauma she must have experienced.

Helen was wondering how to wake her up when Sam's eyes flashed open. 'You,' she said, with a hint of resentment in her voice. And underneath that, fear.

'I need to speak to you,' said Helen, trying to ignore the uncomfortable memories of ordering de Winter to bring this girl in dead or alive.

'Visiting hours again? Why can't I get any sleep round here?'

'I want you to help me.'

Sam sneered.'Oh yeah? Why?'

'Because you're the only one I trust. The creature attacked you. You're my best chance.'

'Then you're in big trouble. If you are who you say you are.'

Helen frowned at her. She found the old impatience bubbling up. 'What does that mean? You think I'm that thing?'

'The thought had occurred to me. Otherwise, how come you're sneaking in here against the Doctor's orders?'

She felt her blood rising.'Your precious Doctor doesn't run this colony yet,you know. I'm in command here!'

'OK, OK, I'm sorry. Sorry. What is it you want?'

Helen glanced around, trying to feel that sensation of being spied on. Was her invisible antagonist out there somehow, listening in on her plans? She would have to take the risk.

'I think Professor Coors woke this... Face-Eater up. I think it lives in the mountains. I want to destroy it.'

'Destroy it? How? This isn't some worker protesting about pay and conditions.'

Helen ignored the jibe.'Don't worry. I have a way. Nobody knows about it. It's just that... I think somebody's spying on me. I can't work out how. I keep laying traps but it's just too clever. You see, if anything happens to me, I want you and Fuller, if we can find him, to carry it out.'

Sam blinked at her. What had she said?

'Fuller? Ben Fuller? You know where he is. I know you do,' Helen snapped. What was it about this damn girl that irritated her so?

'I don't understand. Ben Fuller's dead,' Sam said softly. 'I thought you knew that.'

Fuller dead? This made her need to succeed in this conversation even

more imperative.

Sam was shrinking away, pulling the sheets with her.'What is it?' asked Helen.'How do you know he's dead?'

'Stay away from me,' said Sam nervously.'Just back off.'

'Don't be stupid. I'm trying tell you how we can beat them.'

'I want the guard in here. Get him in now.'

'It's not me, you stupid girl. It's not me!'

Sam kept pulling away from her, the stretching wires causing the diag comp to squeal alarmingly.

'All right, all right; Helen whispered, trying to soothe her. 'I'll fetch the guard, if it makes you happy.'

Not taking her eyes off the frightened girl, Helen walked slowly to the door. As she unlocked it, a change seemed to come over Sam. Imperceptibly, she began to smile. As the door opened, Helen felt very, very sick. She felt the situation had suddenly reversed itself. It had all been an act.

'There's someone I think you should meet,' said Sam, coldly.

Helen turned. Standing in the doorway, helmet and face shield now removed, was Jake Leary.

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Two and a half hours he had been in there. Two and a half hours! And he had learned nothing.

Where was Percival? This kind of delay could prove fatal. Even worse, she might be up to something, off in her own little fantasy world, trying to come up with some way of salvaging her reputation. And never mind what was happening around her.

The Doctor had found more evidence of her encroaching madness. An electronic notebook left unencrypted on her desk. He had called Horton in to read the files to him.

With obviously mounting unease, Horton recited the half-prepared reports to be sent to Earth: weak reassurances insisting that the situation was under control and that she was thinking of relieving Commander de Winter from duty and that she believed that Fuller and Rupinder and Leary and the two newcomers were all part of some kind of plan to usurp her authority and that someone was spying on her and had got into her office without her seeing but she was working on it. And, at the end, a series of coded numbers, accessed from the GMC Net. Of them all, the Doctor found the last the most worrying. He couldn't tell what they were.

'I've never seen them. Could be a password. See those last two digits: 63. That's a code clearance for her eyes only,' was all Horton could tell him.

'Try the colony Net,' he said.

Horton twisted Percival's terminal round. He spent ten minutes trying to find an application.'Nothing,'he said.'Total blank.'

The Doctor stared at the digits again. They were hazy in his strained eyes, hardly visible any more. He just couldn't get the sequence. 'They have to mean something.'

Horton lifted his glasses and wiped his own eyes.'Nothing that I know. Must be real top-security. Perhaps it needs a specific terminal. Something not on the Net.'

'Do you have anything like that?'

Horton thought for a moment. 'Don't see why. Even the medical and construction computers are all networked. We had to, once we found the non-cable communications wouldn't work. I helped link them myself.'

The Doctor considered the possibilities. 'If there was such a terminal in the Installation, where would it be?'

'Offhand, I don't know. I mean, there's hundreds of them here. Cheaper to supply than food. It could be anything from a wristwatch to the mainframe down on Level Four...' His voice tailed off.

'What?' asked the Doctor.

Horton seemed elated,glad to have found something.'Level Four. That has to be where she's been. One of the first completed structures on the colony. The mainframe is there, and only Percival has access to the inner control room. It's set up for a final emergency situation. You know, assuming everything else is lost. There could easily be a terminal in there and it would make sense to keep it out of the colony Net.'

The Doctor slapped his arm. 'Good man.'

'That still doesn't tell us what these codes are for.' Despite his words, he was beaming. This was probably the first praise he'd received since the colony had gone mad.

'Use your head,' said the Doctor.'What do you think they're for? The only way Percival can keep her reputation intact. Even as a martyr.'

Horton froze. His mouth moved silently. 'Oh my God,' he managed.'I'd better get down there.'

'You stay here, Mr Horton. You're effectively running this place now. I need you to monitor the city. It's not just Percival we're fighting, you know.'

'Shouldn't we better warn the citizens?'

'What's the point? Whatever she's going to do it's going to be big. And probably loud. Our only chance is if I get to her first.'

'And how are you going to do that?'

The phone on the desk rang. The Doctor stared at it for a second.'Let's see, shall we?'

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He raced along to the hospital. How could he have been so stupid? The voice had been clear and precise, the madness unmistakable. Somehow, Percival had got to Sam. Inevitable, but so soon? And whatever she was playing around with on Level Four was something he hadn't bargained on at all. How could he have been so easily outwitted? Of course the colony would have such a device.

As he ran, he tried to find a way through this situation. There was nothing as long as Percival held the codes. And until he could get Sam to tell him what he needed to know, he would have to play along.

As he reached the elevator that would take him up to the hospital level, he shoved his way past Installation staff still on duty. IT, maintenance, administration. Men and women paired up, no one wanting to be alone. These people's devotion to duty amazed him. They knew something was among them, a god of death and destruction, and yet they still clung on to normality. What would it take to break their spirits? The absence of workers in the operations centre implied to him that they were more scared of Percival than anything else. Was it because she represented a threat they could comprehend? Their knowledge of the Face-Eater would still be nothing but vague rumours and sensationalised death. Well, they would learn.

He stood in the elevator with a couple of IT clerks. They eyed his strange clothes warily, as if expecting him to transform himself into some ravening, slavering creature. He ignored them.

He ran through the ward, with its recovering wounded. Nishi was bent over a broken limb, encasing the unnatural angle in solidifying foam. He didn't even notice the Doctor pass by.

Through the airlock and into the Isolation corridor. A foot was protruding from a half-open cupboard right outside Sam's room. He presumed by the pink soles and black toes that it was the guard he had seen earlier. Idiot. Had he been asleep?

He reached the door and licked his lips. Was this really the best course of action? There had to be something better, some kind of elaborate scheme to lure Percival out.

No. He needed Sam. If this was his last action, he had to find out what she knew. He knocked and twisted the door handle. He braced himself for a shock.

Nothing. Just a dark room. Percival had turned off the lights. How had she known?

He had to walk in, he needed to check on Sam. He took a step forward. Were they there, hiding in the gloom?

'Doctor. Come in,' came Sam's voice.

He decided to concentrate on the LEDs that were still flickering in the distance. He had to, knowing already that Percival would be pressing herself into the wall next to the door.

He walked inside. With a start he tried to bang the light switch into action. A hand grabbed his, twisted his arm and threw him forward. Without light he was disabled, inferior.

'Sam!' he shouted.'Are you all right?'

'She's fine,' said a man's voice. 'You, however, are in real trouble.'

'Who's that?' he asked, starting to turn. Something launched itself into his back and threw him to the floor. He heard his knees crack as they slammed into the tiles. Pain arched through his body. He snatched for breath, guessing what had happened. 'What have they said, Sam?' he pleaded. 'What have they said about me?'

He tried to look around in the dark. Three unfamiliar shapes, three silhouettes in addition to the contents of the room he had seen before. What did they want?

'How did you know Ben was dead?' asked Sam. He swung around in the direction of her voice. If she only looked into his eyes. She would be convinced.

'What do you mean?' he asked plaintively.

'No one else knew. Except me. And the Face-Eater.'

'Sam,can't see you... too dark...'

'What's the matter?' came the man's voice. 'Can't see too well, huh?'

'Don't listen to them, Sam,' the Doctor insisted. She had to know.'It's Percival. She's here, I know it. She's got some kind of device. I found out and now she wants you to put me out of the way.'

'Is that the best you can do?' said Percival. He swung round again. If only he could get to the lights. Then he could work out where they were.

'Ask her!' he shouted.'Ask her to deny it.'

'I don't deny anything, Doctor.'

'We have to be sure. Percival. We have to be sure.' Sam again. And that was their weak link. If only he could get through to her.

'It's him,' said the man.

'I have to be sure!' she snapped back.

'Waste of time.'

He was losing his sense of who was speaking, just voices going round and round in the dark. 'Sam,' the Doctor tried. Perhaps he could still get what he needed. 'You know how to detect them. What do you see?'

'How did you know Ben was dead?'

'I don't remember. Perhaps you told me when they brought you in. Or that deputy of his. Jeffries. That's right. He told me.'

'Why are you lying? Doctor, if it is you, you have to let me know.'

He stopped moving. He crouched on the floor, trying to feel their movement vibrations through the floor tiles. What would convince her? 'Sam. Sam. Listen to me. Remember the cell. Remember those three years. I thought I would go mad, I really did. You saw me weak, weaker than anyone has ever seen me. My pictures, you remember my pictures.'

Another pause. 'This is stupid. It's just giving him more time.'

'No,' said Sam. 'Doctor, if it is you, prove it. I know you can do it.'

The Doctor thought for a second. How long was this going

to go on? How much was Sam's information really worth? He made his decision.

'All right; he said. Then he smiled.'Let's do it.'

And with that, he ripped through this skin he had worn for so long and

lashed out at those who were trying to imprison him.

Chapter Sixteen
Jack's Bach

The pain in his leg died away. He had willed it gone. For all its miraculous qualities, cellular regeneration was a slow, painful business. The ropes hadn't helped, nor the claustrophobia. Confinement. There had been times when he'd thought he'd go mad. Infection compounded the delirium, his antibodies working overtime to convert and expel it.

Time had merged into one long, numbing nightmare. Feverish sweat soaked him in periodic waves. In rare moments of lucidity he made out a cellar, overturned furniture, Leary sitting absolutely still, the weapon he cradled in his lap.

'Help...' he had moaned on that first day, feeling the crunch as his shin bone twisted and worked itself. The thirst had almost killed him, burning and relentless. He remembered asking the man in the chair to give him water - he would have done anything, just give him water. He supposed he had been as close to true death as he had ever been. Even trying the old self-induced-coma trick had been unsuccessful, the pain in his sealing bones disrupting his concentration. Loops of music circled and gnawed away at his mind: 'Ode to Joy' swelling and reducing over and over and over.

After an eternity, the Doctor came to himself. Intense pins and needles in the repaired limb told him it was once again functional. The heat vented out of his brain.

And all the time Leary had barely moved. Just sat and watched. Perhaps he had fed and watered in one of the many lapses into unconsciousness.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor.'I imagine that it was you who saved me down in the sewer.'

Nothing. No response.

He studied Leary, live in the flesh. Bigger than you would think. Hair long and straggled, face dark and studied, the strange off-worlder pallor. Dressed in an old raincoat. Hands thick and mottled around the rifle. What did he want, still like that?

'Why have you tied me up?' asked the Doctor. No answer, just his eyes glittering in the dark. 'What do you want me to do?'

Leary was silent, utterly impassive.

The Doctor tried to think. It took his mind from the furious itching in his newly mended leg. If Leary had wanted him dead, he would be so. Why tie him to a chair and then sit there staring? Not for fun. The poor fellow must be in absolute agony, keeping still hour after hour after hour.

The Face-Eater. Leary had encountered the creature and survived. Perhaps he knew some weakness in the shape-shifters. It had to be some kind of test. He was waiting to see whether the Doctor would alter his form. This was a trap.

Why just sit there, in plain view? Anyone could see him.

Except that a shape-shifter couldn't. Leary must have discovered that they were nearly blind. Perhaps sight, perhaps all the senses, were under-developed in the shape-shifters; the sensory apparatus too complex to mimic precisely. Leary was assuming a shape-shifter could detect movement but not segregate still objects from their background.

The Doctor realised he was the witch on the ducking stool. He couldn't win. If he changed form, Leary would kill him. If he didn't, Leary would wait until he dropped dead from hunger and thirst. Or went mad.

Again, the Doctor felt the panic of confinement surfacing. He swallowed and willed it away. There was only one way out. He was going to have to talk Leary into releasing him.

'Let me go,' he began.'I'm not a shape-shifter. I'm trying to fight them. Like you.'

Leary made no sign that he was listening. The Doctor realised the man had reached some kind of mental focus, had gone into some kind of trance, partly deliberate, partly the result of the strain of staying still for so long. This was going to be a long job.

'I can understand what you're thinking. You probably found me down in that sewer with Joan Betts's body. You have to believe me when I tell you that you were meant to do so, to use your time doing exactly what it is you're doing. The Face-Eater is cunning - it's supremely intelligent,

you know that. Now, I don't know what is happening to the colony but it wants you out of the way. Even if you don't release me, you need to contact the Installation. How long can you go on like this? For your own sake, for the lives of your colleagues. If you can help them you must, even if it means turning yourself in.'

Leary was like rock, like the statue of a man. The Doctor would have taken time to admire his concentration if it hadn't been so important that he get out of here!

No. He mustn't panic. He mustn't lose his temper. Use the image of the statue, keep it there. He is a stone man and you will convince him only by chipping away, chip chip chip. He is listening, you are getting through. All you need is time.

For an hour, he tried nonsense. 'You're from Mars, I hear. Well, I'd be careful if I were you. Funny place, Mars. Two indigenous forms of life, totally different. Ice Warriors and... the other lot, Martians I suppose. Certain people have spent years trying to tie them together. Never do it, of course...'

Keep chipping.

For the second hour, he told Leary the story of his life. 'Lycanthropic properties aren't anything new, of course,' he said lightly. 'Nor is the old "telepathic tapping into your deepest fears" chestnut. Apart from a long, noble history in literature, I've seen it all over the galaxy. Werewolves, manitous, shape-shifters, Rutans, robots. Even the Master has been known to give it a whirl. And did I tell you about that time at Crook Marsham? Most memorable. Did I tell you? Have we got time? Oh, I think so. Here we go then. There was this radio telescope,you see...'

Hour three: let's work together.'We need to work out what the Face-Eater wants. What does it need? I say it because I believe there is one central governing intelligence. These shape-shifters are Proximan natives just as much as that species you so graciously call Rats. Perhaps they're an older, less degenerated form. Their chameleon abilities are still functioning. It doesn't matter. What we should be thinking about is: why is it here? Just to stop humans taking over its planet? That's possible, but I think there's another reason. What do you think?'

Chip .

Hour four: mysticism. Did the man never even visit the lavatory? 'When I used the focal point in the nest, somehow I believe I became part of their shared consciousness. Their telepathic abilities are quite astonishing. The Proximan natives I mean. I felt a great sadness in them... Some tragedy at the separation from the One, the central motivator that we call the Face-Eater. For some reason, they felt cut off, their link incomplete, perhaps deliberately. I think this is relevant to our cause. There is a weakness here, something we can use.'

Chip chip .

Hour five. It was time to test his resolve. 'Mr Leary. Let's stop playing games. Isn't it obvious that I'm not a shape-shifter. Do you think I'd still be in these ropes if I was? Wouldn't I just change form and take the risk. If I was a shape-shifter, haven't you wasted enough of my time? I believe I'm faster than you at this moment.Your muscles will have cramped quite seriously by now. I don't think you could respond quickly enough to catch me, even in my vulnerable mid-transformation state, which is undoubtedly what you're waiting for. I'm not doing it. I can see you perfectly well.'

Nothing, not even a grunt.

'Let's at least chat. Why do you think I am one anyway? Have you never heard of innocent until proven guilty?'

Chip chip chip

At last, with the cramp in the Doctor's own muscles doing a dance up his leg, and his stomach and throat and head pounding with thirst and hunger and lack of exercise, Leary moved. He twisted his head round on the neck. His legs shifted slightly. The hands clutching the rifle flexed and twisted. The statue had come to life. He coughed.

'Joan Berts,' he said. He stood up.

'I'm sorry. She just wouldn't listen to me. I gave her every opportunity.'

'Shut up.' The worn, bearlike face was stretched tight with restraint. He pulled back the bolt on the gun. Not for the first time in his life, the Doctor stared down an open barrel.'You murdered her. I saw it. Give me a reason not to kill you.'

'You'd just be doing what it wants. It was a trap. So it was me she saw in the shadows. Of course. It sensed me when I communed at the rock. If you kill me, you'll only be helping it.'

'What?' His voice was hoarse with disuse. He was definitely less certain, although the Doctor could see there was something wild in Leary's face. He could still do it: he had been hunted for so long, he could still pull the trigger.

'Why didn't you kill me earlier? Why truss me up? Go to all this effort?'

'I don't have to tell you anything.'

'You spoke to me.You didn't have to do that.'

'Anything to shut you up. You were driving me crazy.' The Doctor dropped his head. He didn't want Leary to see him smile.'Could I have some water. Please. I promise I won't try anything.'

'No.'

'We need to talk. And to talk I need water.'

'No.'

'All right. I'll sing for my supper. I'll tell you why you didn't kill me.'

At last, Leary lowered the gun. Poor fellow, must be utterly confused. He wouldn't be surprised if the man's mind had broken in some way. He must have suffered terribly.

'All right, I'll tell you,' he said softly. 'You couldn't. You couldn't kill me because you weren't sure. You have... morality.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really. And I think I've convinced you I'm nothing to do with the Face-Eater...'

'What is that name?'

The question made the Doctor look up again. He saw something, some

change, an inkling of what Jake Leary might once have been like. Curious, always wanting to know.'It's a translation,' he replied. 'Its real name is unpronounceable. The Face-Eater is a rough approximation of what the Proximan natives have called it. You saw it on your expedition, or as much of it as any human has.'

'How do you know about that? Who are you?'

'I am the Doctor. And I've come to help. If you'll let me.'

Leary stood up. Carefully, he placed the rifle on the line of chairs on which he had been sitting. He reached into a rucksack and produced a plastic flask.

'Are you going to free me?' asked the Doctor.

'No.' He unscrewed the flask.'Here.' Leary walked over and upturned the flask over the Doctor's face. He felt it streaming over his nose and mouth and into his throat. It felt, it tasted like nectar. He sucked it down more and more. When he had finished he used the fountain to hydrate his face, twisting and turning under its flow. 'That feels eight hundred and thirty-two point one per cent better,' he said when the flask was empty. His body throbbed with the liquid.

Leary had already sat down. "Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'Now. Let's talk. Tell me about your expedition.'

***

It was a fascinating, age-old story. The doomed expedition. The awakening of some long dormant power. The punishment for good old wanderlust. How many times had he heard it before?

He had to work out the specifics. Anything could be important. 'You saw Professor Coors's face actually in the rocks, you say. Embedded in them?'

Leary had re-energised himself telling his tale. He paced the room, anxious for action.

'No. Not at all.' Once again his eyes held the shock and strain of that traumatic time. 'Not embedded. Part of the rock. As if... as if its patterns had formed themselves into his shape. I didn't see it for long. It was dark

and then something came out of nowhere and took Price.' He stared at his shaking hands, as if still not believing how it could have happened to him.

'How did you escape from the caverns?'

'It was laughing at us. I could hear it laughing. It had been waiting...'

'How did you get out? Leary!'

He reacted as if slapped. He faced the Doctor, his eyes shining. Unconsciously, he bunched his fists. 'How do you think? I ran. While it was... the others... I ran. Don't know how far. So much blood, they just seemed to... I heard it sucking up their blood. Echoes round the tunnels. I had some blasting caps, threw them into the cavern. Saw it coming for me. Then, all I remember is rocks falling. When I woke up, I crawled back... found this tunnel into the city. Saw the shape-shifters, like bats, clinging to the walls. Watched them change themselves. Knew I had to follow. But I was weak, too weak to keep up. Can't remember.'

Despite his treatment, despite all that had happened, the Doctor could feel only pity for this haggard figure standing so disconsolately in front of him. 'I did it, Doctor. It was my fault. I killed them.'

At last, the Doctor realised the time had come. There was work to be done. 'Oh, don't be so silly.' He let the ropes fall and hoisted himself unsteadily up. Leary was gaping at him in disbelief.

'When...?'he asked.

'About two hours ago. When I was telling you about that time I ran into the Hoothi.You were well away.'

He pressed at his knee, feeling the new bone. Seemed strong enough. 'Now,' he said, anxious to get things moving again. ''There are one or two things I need you to do for me.'

Leary threw himself at the rifle lying on the chair. It went crashing over, him with it. Leary was straight up, hauling back the bolt. The top of his forehead was bleeding.

'Get up,' said the Doctor. 'You just look daft.'

He stretched. Glorious. He touched his toes. Not so glorious but very, very necessary. There was just one more thing to do. A very important thing. Even a Time Lord couldn't hold on to his bladder for ever.

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Half an hour later, he felt good as new. The leg had regenerated perfectly, not even a scar. It was time for business. He told Leary what he wanted him to do. When he'd finished, the man was, unsurprisingly, not hugely thrilled.

However, the prospect of positive action galvanised the geologist to an extent. Leary seemed a bit less like a shell-shocked casualty. He was even happy to volunteer information. 'I think there's something in that cellar on West Eighteenth,' he said. 'I've watched them carry the bodies there. I've been following them for months. I keep losing their trails, either because they give me the slip or the cops get on my back. I had one a week ago. Found him in a bar. Managed to tie him to a chair just like you. I'd worked out they couldn't see too well, and thought that they were probably most weak when they had to change. It tires them out, I think.'

The Doctor nodded. This really was quite a clever young man.'So they like to find a quiet place where they won't be disturbed. Even tied to a chair it would have been afraid to change. It would want to be absolutely sure. Why do you think they take the bodies to the cellar?'

'I don't know. I've never gone in there.'

'What do you mean?'

Leary winced. He tapped at the wound on his head.

The Doctor reached into Leary's rucksack. He pulled out a gel pack. 'You're bleeding. Let me.'

Leary flinched when he put his hand on his arm to sit him down. 'It's all right, Mr Leary. Calm down. Or do you still mistrust me?'

'I don't think I've got much choice now, have I? If you are... one of them, there's not much I can do about it, is there.'

'Let me tell you why I think they're moving the bodies into that cellar,'

said the Doctor brightly. 'I think they need something from them. Some kind of extract. It's a collection.'

He finished smearing the healing gel over the cut above Leary's head. The renegade winced in pain. 'Oh, come on,' the Doctor said. 'You're from Mars. You're supposed to be tough.'

'Doctor, there's something that doesn't add up. Why doesn't the Face-Eater, I mean the one in the mountain, just attack the colony directly? Why bother with all this shape-shifter stuff? I mean, it destroyed my team without blinking.'

'Good question. It can only be that it needs more of whatever it takes from its victims. I've got a nasty feeling it's preparing itself for something much, much bigger. If only I'd seen Sam before all this happened. She was going to have a look at what the shape-shifter left behind.'

'I can't go back to the Installation,' Leary said gruffly. 'Percival will kill me.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' replied the Doctor. 'I think she'll be far too busy by now to worry what you're up to.You've got to go there and persuade them to trust you. You're the only who can spot these creatures.' He rubbed his wrists ruefully. 'And even you aren't one hundred per cent accurate. I just hope we haven't lost too much time.'

'How will I know this Sam girl when I get there?' Leary complained.'I mean, there are five thousand colonists on this planet. How will I know?'

The Doctor realised he was still a long from recovering from his trauma. He still doubted himself. He probably needed pepping up.

'You'll know,' said the Doctor. 'She'll be the one causing all the trouble. Listen, Joan risked everything for you. I'm no expert in these matters but you meant a lot to that woman. Perhaps this will be your chance to do something for her.'

Leary was silent. He saw the anger in the man's face, saw the weeks of frustration and doubt congealing into this new determination.

'And what are you going to be doing while I'm walking into certain death?' he asked.

Carefully, the Doctor resealed the gel pack and replaced it in the rucksack. This was the bit he didn't like himself.

'Well?' snapped Leary.'What are you going to do?'

'Oh, the usual.' He tried to keep his voice casual, as if bysaying it wasn't hard it wouldn't be. 'Save the planet.'

'Uh?'

'I'm going to find a native Proximan to take me into the mountain.'

Leary seemed stunned.'You can't! It'll destroy you!'

'Yes,' he replied. "That is a distinct possibility.'

***

Leary led him out of the little cellar that had been their shared home for nearly a week now. They had been spending their time inside the vault of a newly built banking house still awaiting occupation on the outskirts of Central. The usual builders' rubble cluttered the lobby as he followed Leary out. In the street, the sun was up and polishing the concrete around them a dazzling white. The Doctor found himself blinking back tears.

'Good luck,' he said to Leary. 'And don't worry. You're big and ugly enough to get into the Installation. Find Sam. She likes rugged men with difficult histories. You'll get on like a house on fire.'

For the first time, Leary smiled. His teeth were white inside the ring of his black beard. 'Good luck to you too. I hope we'll meet again.Your stories weren't that boring, you know. I'd like to hear more.'

'You'll wish you never said that.'

'And I suppose it's no use me insisting on coming with you?'

'It would be a complete waste of time and, besides, you've got more important things to do. You have to persuade them to track down the shape-shifters in the city. Isolate them. It might give us something to bargain with.'

Leary nodded. He pulled his overcoat tighter around the rifle he had hidden inside.'If I get there. Looks like Percival's been busy out here.'

He indicated an overturned motor vehicle. It appeared to have been burned out. "That's an Installation Security van. Something's happened.'

The Doctor looked at it carefully. Something to do with Sam? There was no point in guessing.'It was supposed to,'he said. 'You've just got to make sure you get them to see the error of their ways.'

Leary held out his hand. 'Goodbye Doctor.'

The Doctor made the appropriate cultural response. 'This is normally reserved for the end of the adventure.'

Leary tutted. 'Some adventure,' he said sardonically.

They split up. The Doctor watched him walk through the nearest doorway.

Some adventure, indeed. He started to walk. All he needed now was a sign to show him the way to the Proximan nest.

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Leary was right, something had happened. The city was a mess. The Doctor saw only a handful of people on his way into Central and they were repairing power lines from a cherry-picker wagon, the look of mournful 'how come we're always the ones cleaning up the crap?' on their faces. None even glanced at him as he walked by.

How did he feel? He'd hardly had a chance to think since getting himself out of that cellar.

Well, let's start with'Isn't it wonderful to be outside again?' He found himself incessantly stretching out his arms and legs in unusual ways. He felt his muscles and bones drink in the movements, the way he'd sucked down that water that Leary had poured into him. The air, despite a slight tinge of burning, tasted fresh and invigorating. His new bone felt just fine. No problems at all, as if he'd had it all his lives. All right, perhaps he was walking right into life-threatening danger but for now he would enjoy the freedom, the sunshine, the knowledge that he was alive.

He made his way under the flyover and down into the rocky nest. He didn't have to be telepathic to see that it was deserted. It had that look. He hoped he wasn't too late. The Proximan natives had to be the key to getting him to the Face-Eater. Without their help, the creature would destroy him now it knew of him. He was hoping that it thought it had killed him off.

He climbed the rocks, slip-sliding in his elastic sided shoes. Fair enough, the shin was giving him gyp now. He grimaced as it creaked under his weight. Over the boulders and into the nest.

He had been right. There was no one here. Even the images on the rocks had been scratched and defaced. The natives were destroying the links with the Face-Eater. Their ancestor, or was it descendant? Or even contemporary? He would have to find out if he was to stand any chance of reasoning with it.

A zephyr curled dust around his shoes. He looked up at the hot sun and realised he still didn't know where the Proximans were going - though it didn't take much to guess. The pull of the Face-Eater, now it was alive again, would be irresistible. The only question that mattered was whether they wanted to go. Was there any trace of individuality in them, after the centuries of separation?

A noise, a click, from beneath him. A little head emerged from a hole in the ground. The nest wasn't entirely deserted.

'Cheeky Monkey,' he said delightedly.'How nice to see you again.'

The creature cackled and stuck out its tongue. It bounded out of the hole and into his arms. The Doctor staggered. It was a little too big and smelly and rodent-like to be a cat but at least somebody on this planet was pleased to see him.

'I think you know where we have to go,' said the Doctor.

'Have to go,' it repeated, its breath stale in his face.

He couldn't tell whether Cheeky Monkey was pleased or not. He was just relieved when it jumped off him.

***

They made good time through the near-deserted city. The buildings stood patiently, waiting for the life to be breathed into them. Or something else. It struck the Doctor how little Proxima 2 resisted this very human place. As a planet it had been painted in thick brush strokes: blue sea, grey plain, brown mountains. Apart from the wind it had no identity of its own whatsoever. Perhaps this wasn't such an accident. It reminded him of a husk, like many of the buildings: empty and skeletal.

The afternoon was wearing on. They must have had rain here: pools of water were collected everywhere, drying up as the sun did its job. Cheeky Monkey seemed to enjoy splashing round in them, once the Doctor had shown it how.

Out in the Western Sector even the few people he had seen around dwindled to nothing. 'Word must have got round; said the Doctor.'Do they know something I don't?'

Leary had given precise directions but, really, he felt he didn't need them. Cheeky Monkey knew the way.

The creature was more agitated now. It seemed to be caught in two minds. It probably was: the individual fighting the group mind. It would take great bounds forward towards the overpass that was growing bigger in their view, then it would dash back again, growling at itself, plucking at its fur. The pink weals in its flesh glowed angrily. He surmised it was pinching itself to retain its identity. The anguish reminded the Doctor of his own life. Non serviam ,eh? Even if it's your biological destiny? I like that.'

'Non serviam ,' replied Cheeky Monkey.

'Are you the last one?' the Doctor wondered. 'Has it takenall the others?'

He was filled with admiration for Cheeky Monkey's strength of will. He had his doubts, though, about how long this could last. The sun began its slow descent, the atmosphere turning its light first pink, then, as they reached the Western ring road, a deep blood red.

The Doctor saw the tower and knew instinctively that this was the place.

They found the shape-shifter dragging its way across the floor of the reception area of the building. It was pulling a body like an ant pulling a leaf, determination and grit making up for lack of strength. The body

wore a tan policeman's uniform. Pointed cowboy boots scraped across the uncompleted floor. The face was white and featureless, held in the shape-shifter's spreading claws.

The Doctor watched its efforts from the doorway. It had been wounded somehow, fatally. Its sticklike limbs were shattered and broken, its membranous cover torn and rent. It pulled at the body desperately, then rested, emitting a hoarse, high-pitched mewling.

The Doctor thought about Joan, about the others he'd never met, about what it might have done to Sam, and his eyes narrowed.

The dumpling head with its black, raging eyes turned to look at him. It hissed, a thin tongue darting over a broken splintered face. like a bony jack-o'-lantern. The wide, split mouth moved, words not forming. A bulging sac growing beneath its neck swished with a ruby liquid. Its own blood was nothing but a thin, pallid-grey gruel pulsing a trail in its wake.

The Doctor moved into the building. The creature shivered violently, buzzing like a wasp. It was trying to alter its form. He saw a human hand, misshapen and malformed, like wax melting under a candle. A whole library of faces, none correct, melding into one another. A hideous juddering as it tried to stabilise its broken power.

He would leave it. He couldn't take its life, foul as it was. It posed no threat. Was it even aware of its pain? He would walk past it and into the cellar.

Cheeky Monkey uttered a great angry shriek, the first emotion the Doctor had seen in the little creature. It howled at the shape-shifter, screaming at it.

'Cheeky Monkey...' he started but there was nothing he could do.

The Proximan flew at the shape-shifter, claws and teeth glowing red in the dying light of the sun. The mewling grew louder and the Doctor thought he detected fear in the monster's noise.

Cheeky Monkey ripped and tore with a fury the Doctor would not have thought possible. It didn't stop until the shape-shifter lay in pieces on the drying red floor, like a collection of old bin-liners and twigs.

When it was done, Cheeky Monkey retracted its claws and turned to

him, the old expressionless stare on its face. Only the standing hairs on its body betrayed any emotion whatsoever. The stolen blood from the sac stained its fur.

The Doctor turned away from the remains. He couldn't judge the action, it was beyond him. All they could do was go on.

'All right Cheeky Monkey,' he said.'Lead the way.'

Chapter Seventeen
All's Right With The World

Someone must have been telling lies about Jake Leary, for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning...

Only he wasn't. He gave himself up.

Suddenly, the world becomes crystal clear. It is as if you, the real YOU, has been waiting deep inside, waiting for the mists to disperse, for order to establish itself once more. Those alien patterns, those coloured nebulae (the you that replaced YOU) have gone. The Doctor has condensed their ephemeral vapour into solid chunks, easily disposed of.

The Installation is real. The room is real. The girl seems real enough. Only this new Doctor, the false Doctor, remains as apart of the old poison. And now he lies on the floor in pieces.

And there is Her.

The isolation room was a mess. A real mess. That thing just hadn't known when to give up the ghost.

The diag comp was still beeping away, just, its front panel stove in. Lucky she hadn't been in the bed, it looked like five elephants had held an orgy in it. OK, not five.

Apart from a slight headache and one hell of a blocked-up nose, Sam felt fine. Which was more than could be said for the shape-shifter.

Sam could remember the anger, was aware that it had overwhelmed her, but couldn't feel the sensation. Such anger too: she never thought she had it in her. It had been a white, blinding fury, outrage that that thing had the nerve to pose as the Doctor. And that she could have been so duped. OK, it had acted funny when it was asking her all those questions but not until hairy Leary had shown up did she make the connection.

When Jake Leary had come into her room, Sam had been scared stupid. She recognised him immediately, despite the stolen uniform. He was big. A huge frame. The thick Martian beard. And his eyes, those tired, fiery eyes. So much there, pain, exhaustion, even triumph.

Her brain was spinning with the crash and the chase and illness and her face impacting on the dashboard that she couldn't keep track of who was going to be on her side and who wasn't. It was confusing. Then he had spoken of the Doctor and that he was OK and had worked everything out and that whatever it was that had looked like the Doctor who had spoken to her earlier that day wasn't him.

She hadn't wanted to believe, couldn't cope with any more turnarounds. Why trust Leary, a wanted man, and not the Doctor?

His eyes. That's why. What he said felt right. This Doctor had been different. Colder, less kind. Enough to make her doubt.

It had been her idea to get Percival into the room. Despite her nuttiness, she needed to be convinced. If Leary would do that, Sam had argued, she would believe his story.

She remembered Percival sneaking into the room. Babbling, sweating, shaking with hypertension. Off her trolley. And when Leary revealed himself there was an instant, a moment, when Sam thought Percival would go from neurotic into bonkers overdrive. Sam had a brief flash of fear, wondering whether her bright idea had been that bright after all.

Here was the man Percival had chased for so long, the man she had accused, without evidence, of murder. Was her fear physical, that Leary -would kill her, or the fear that she would now have to face up to her own lies? With Percival you never could tell.

Surprisingly quickly, as far as Sam was concerned, Percival recovered her composure. Hmm...

She seemed resigned, as if she had always known this moment would come. Although very little was said, Sam sensed the rivalry and the tension between them. If Percival displayed any guilt over her actions, Sam couldn't see it.

And then that thing with the Doctor had to be sorted out and all recriminations were put on hold.

***

'You,'she says. 'Always you.'

You aren't sure what she has been doing, saying about you, but all that is over.

'We need to talk,'you say to her.

'I did what I felt was for the best; she replies. An apology for deeds of which he is ignorant. Her hands shake. 'It was for the greater good.'

'We need to talk.'

***

She had been taken unawares, shocked by just how instantly the creature was able to alter its form. One minute it was the Doctor, spinning around in the dark feeling sorry for itself, the next...

There had been fear, the feeling that she was in some recurring nightmare, that she hadn't escaped from the car at all, that it was all still going on and she would never, never shake it off. Which was when her rage had kicked in. Some reaction to the sheer transgression of using the Doctor in this way.

Leary had gone to work with the fire axe. The shape-shifter had screamed and screeched and tried to use its claws but Leary was a man with a mission.

Now Sam thought about it, her own anger had been a tantrum compared with the temper Leary had displayed in hacking it to shreds. And then hacking it some more. Serious stress relief. Even Percival had joined in the fun, firing stun bolts into its shuddering form.

Sam guessed the thing had taken less than a minute to die. It felt like a lifetime. The pieces of it shook and fluttered, trying to rebuild itself. So Leary had gone at it again. At last, the movement ceased and the shape-shifter was nothing but garbage, the stink of its death filling the room.

***

You feel clean, purged. Identity seeps in, pouring in like air into an emptying bottle.

The confusion, the hatred, the guilt, all that has defined you since that time, is spilling away.

This thing, this monster that tore you apart, can be beaten. It has become external.

There will be an autopsy, a postmortem, but you are, YOU are, returning. A page has been turned. It is time for planning, for preparation. What lies in those mountains, that which turned you and this colony inside out, will be scourged.

This will be the last thing: to turn outward, to help those who helped you. The Doctor. Facing the evil alone. Protect the colony and help the Doctor. Then you will be whole.

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Sam sat in the administration office, dressed in a shiny white executive trouser suit. She wondered how she was feeling. Physically, unbelievably better. Her wounds, which she was sure had been so threatening, had almost entirely gone; even the bruises around her eyes were fading to yellow. As for the fever, had humanity really found a cure for the common cold or had it just gone away, aware that really it wasn't making much of an impact among the other, bigger, ailments?

Emotionally, she wasn't sure she had recovered at all. Her brain felt numb, drained, concerned that she wasn't free of those things that had found life inside her.

All she could do was sit and stare at the wall. The admin staff were returning to normal duty around her, relieved that the crisis was over.

Percival and Leary were at it hammer and tongs in the exec office. Angry shouting had been emerging for nearly an hour, punctuated by the occasional muffled crashing of office equipment being hurled around the room. On a kinder level, she liked to think she was giving the pair space to conduct a therapeutic bonding session. She heard Leary swearing his head off. It seemed to be working.

Sam had stayed out of the way, caught up in her own thoughts about how quickly she had healed. About micro-life.

Steve Horton, who had actually turned out to be a very nice man, had

found some herbal tea somewhere and couldn't be dissuaded from making her a cup every five minutes, when he wasn't on the phone trying to rescue some kind of order from the chaos the colony had descended into.

It seemed that the crisis was over and all was right with the world.

Except that the Doctor had apparently gone walkabout into the mountain to confront Face-Eater Central on his own. A crazy, brave, stupid thing to do, even for him. She just hoped he would stay alive long enough for her to get to him. If Percival and Leary could make up their bloody minds about what they were going to do next.

Something else too. Something Percival had said, when they had lured her into the isolation room. She had spoken of a plan, something she had ready for the Face-Eater. Connect that with her surprisingly cool demeanour and it was clear that all wasnot right with the world.

Horton knew it. He just wasn't saying. Sam suspected he was still dealing with how lucky he had been to have been in contact with the shape-shifter for so long and survive.

'Mr Horton,' she asked firmly on one of the rare occasions he put down the telephone.'What was your boss's plan?'

He reacted only slightly, an almost imperceptible flicker in his temple. It was enough.'You know, don't you,' she kept at him. 'You might as well tell me. I can be annoyingly persistent.'

His smile became a little more forced. She had got to him. Had she done enough to get him to open up?

'Yes. You look the persistent type.' He tilted his head, perhaps taking in some of Leary's choice metaphors from the office. 'All right, we found some kind of code sequence on her notepad. Me and that... beast. I couldn't work out what it meant. It didn't correspond to any access codes I could find on the Net. So I went looking.'

'Does she really have a bomb?'

'It's possible,' replied Horton. 'Some last-resort nuclear device. Perhaps neutronic. That would make sense. I don't want to think about it. That she could have used it.'

Sam breathed out. How close had they come? If Leary hadn't turned up...

'And you found it?'

'No. But I've got a pretty good idea what those access codes might be.'

'What?'

'I shouldn't tell you this. I'm not telling you this, OK? I think they're a signal to our orbital satellite. Some of the numbers corresponded to geographical co-ordinates. To move POSSAT. An airburst would have a huge spread, half the continent.You could destroy the threat, whatever it was, but leave the city intact for a later date. Of course, all life would be extinguished. But at least the colony would still function.'

'listen, if I were you, Mr Horton, I'd try to find out how that bomb works. I don't think our Ms Percival is really responsible enough to be allowed toys like that.'

'I couldn't,' said Horton. 'I don't have clearance. She is still my boss. And the crisis has passed, hasn't it?'

Something told Sam that it wasn't as neat and tidy as that. 'You've got the codes, haven't you? And do you really believe she wouldn't do it?'

Horton's ashen face provided her with the answer she had been seeking.

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Sam barged her way into Percival's office. The Colony Exec and Leary were glaring at each other. Shattered and spilt office furniture lay thrown around what was now a junk pile of an office.

'Get out!' they both bellowed together.

Sam raised her hands to placate them.'Hold on,' she said.'I think playtime's over.'

'You just don't get it, do you?' yelled Leary. 'It's not over! We need a properly manned expedition into those mountains. We have to find this

thing and...'

Even Sam was stunned by the fierceness of Leary's anger. He was literally trembling with rage. Great, she thought, the colony is now run by two nutters.

'The meeting is adjourned,' replied Percival smugly. 'We found the remains of the second creature at the Castanedes Tower. Dead. That means both are accounted for and disposed of. The tower has been sealed off and a permanent security presence has been stationed. What more needs to be done?'

'What about the Doctor?' asked Sam.

They carried on right over her. Leary nodded furiously, as if she had said the first part of his sentence for him. 'And his idea that the shape-shifters were just the beginning of the attack? That something big was going to happen? Or is that too inconvenient right now?'

Percival brushed at her jacket. 'Some thing? Speculation like that is simply seditious. As for the Doctor, well, not part of my remit. He bears no official status in this colony. If he wants to go off looking for some mystical experience it's none of my business. My job is to get the city back on its feet. And you're going to help me. To reassure the citizens that the situation has been normalised.'

Sam saw that Leary was about to boil over. He was making it worse for himself. 'Wait,' she said softly. 'You're not getting through.'

She didn't blame him, though. Percival was being entirely unreasonable. He wasn't asking her to turn lead into gold. She could see how he would have got on so well with the Doctor. There was something of the moral hero in this big, barrel-chested lunk.

Her words seemed to have an effect.When Leary spoke, his plea was forceful, respectful and logical. 'Look here, Percival - I've raised this question time after time. You've always refused. What's more, you've refused to give me any reasons. At least tell me one thing - why on earth are you taking this stand?'

Helen Percival returned his stare evenly and without emotion. At long last, the Chief Executive of the Proxima 2 colony gave her answer. 'I believe that an expedition of the sort you wish to mount is bad for the

morale of the citizens of this city.'

Sam went cold.

Leary's voice remained controlled, even. "Then, Ms Percival, except for a miracle, Proxima City is as good as lost.'

Sam stared at Leary, a lead weight settling in her stomach. 'It's going to be a lot worse for morale once these creatures start running all over the colony,' she said.

'That won't happen,' Percival snapped. 'I don't know why you two look so shocked, anyway. You're heroes now. That will be all.'

'What about the satellite codes?' Sam asked, aware of the nastiness in her voice.

A shadow seemed to pass over Percival's face. She controlled whatever emotion had caused it. 'No longer necessary. Not your concern. It's over now. Get some rest, and get Dr Nishi to take a look at you. I'm addressing the colonists in Central Plaza at 0300 hours and I want you both there.You understand me? The emergency is over.'

Leary turned and slammed a huge fist into the door. It splintered beneath his blow. Sam grabbed his arm.'Come on,' she said softly.'It won't do any good.'

She led him out of the office. 'It's over!' shouted Percival petulantly after them.

***

For the colonists of Proxima 2, the crisisdid appear to be over. As they walked out on to the streets on yet another sunny morning, it felt as if they had survived some terrible, cruel winter.

No one really seemed to know exactly what had threatened them. The security vans had been real enough, out of control, but retribution would come for those who had crossed the line. It was the other thing, the darkness, that had been the real worry. There were rumours: that vampires walked among them, that Percival had gone insane and ordered de Winter to exterminate them all, that a plague had hit the city turning its unfortunate victims into slavering monsters, that Leary had

fought with demons and lived. No one knew for sure. All they did know was that it had all worked out. They had survived. The bad dreams had gone.

With relief came anger. Anger that the situation had been so badly handled. That those placed in trust to run their affairs had made serious errors. Something would have to be done - these matters had to be addressed. The city had survived but not unchanged. The scars on the streets were there for all to see. When Percival called a public meeting in Central Plaza to be held that afternoon, she'd promised they would have the chance to make their opinions count. This disgrace could not be allowed to happen again. That afternoon was going to be momentous.

Casey Burns counted herself lucky. She'd been in the thick of the fighting, from that first fateful night when she decided to go along to the demonstration. Since then, her life had changed out of all recognition. In the absence of any recognised labour leaders, she'd found herself co-ordinating the fight-back against the security forces. The only other thing she could ever remember co-ordinating was which order she would put her food trays into the microwave. Now, four days later, she found that people knew her. She had a reputation. They thought she knew the answers to their problems. They wanted her, a destitute plumber from Jo'burg, to make their case to Helen Percival concerning the way things were going to be run from now on.

She thought back over the events that changed her life, remembered the makeshift medical facilities, the barricades on the hideouts, the firebombing of security vans. She remembered her fear when the stun guns, the gas and the batons came tumbling in on them. The fear on the faces of her friends. The anger. She thought of all these things as she read through the list of demands they'd given her to present, and concluded that, well, no matter where you go, you never can tell.

***

Sam followed Leary up into the park. He stormed out of the elevator, along the ruined lawn. He ignored the maintenance men replanting the torn-out trees, clearing the gravel that had spilled out from the pathways.

She tried to keep up but her body still lacked the energy she was accustomed to. The sunshine felt uncomfortably hot, the air thick with dust. 'Wait!' she cried after him, wheezing with effort. 'You're not going to

achieve anything. Wait. Please!'

Perhaps it was this that caused him to turn.'I'll kill her!' he roared.

The maintenance workers, in their red tunics, were moving away from him, as if he still carried that for which he had been so long accused.

'I'd keep your voice down if I were you,' said Sam, trying to smile at them, to reassure them.

'Why are you following me? What do you want?' he barked at her. Before he gave her the chance to reply he was off again. Jesus, he made her ears want to retreat back into her head. 'I'll go to that mountain on my own if I have to. You want to try to stop me?'

He was massive, a giant. One big solid hairy giant. But, for all that, he was still a man. And she knew how to deal with men. As with actresses, sometimes you just had to praise them hard enough. 'I don't want to sound like a token woman in a Bruce Willis movie, but what good is it going to do if you get yourself killed?'

'The Doctor needs help. I can't leave him to face whatever's there on his own.'

'I'm not saying we don't go. I'm saying we go with more than good intentions. While they're all patting each other on the back, we need to be preparing ourselves.'

'Don't you tell me my business.'

'Well, stop being a prat! If we're going to work together I don't need this "mean, moody and male" crap. Look, we'd better go before Percival works out we're gone.'

He stomped away. Sam knew she had the measure of him. He just wasn't going to admit it, that was all. With a big grin on her face, she raced through the park after him.

***

The first thing they did was steal a wagon. Leary took her on foot to a depot in Central. There were a few people about but they weren't putting themselves out to get things going. It was more, so Sam thought, that

they were wandering around in shock, trying to refamiliarise themselves with what it was they were supposed to be doing.

Leary pushed open a gate in a wire fence and walked over to the shabby depot offices. Paper spilled out of an open door across the concrete slabs of the yard. Sam followed, trying not to show him how tired she was.

The exhaustion was cheering in its way. It confirmed her hopes that it was the colony medical facilities that had patched her up, not the other thing.

The second thing they did was drive the wagon through the busying streets to pick up some weapons. Leary screeched the huge vehicle to a halt at another nondescript-looking building. 'Security stores,' he said. 'Stay here.'

Sam, of course, did nothing of the sort. She was really not very happy about carting weapons around. It was too easy to end up in the kind of disaster that had happened in the city, with the riot police. You give men guns and they're gonna shoot people. Right? And, from her experiences with the shape-shifters, little electric Flash Gordon blasters were only going to give you a false sense of security. And get you ripped to pieces.

The third thing they did was get caught.

A detachment of Installation Security (yes, apparently they were still allowed to roam the streets, despite what they were calling de Winter's 'regrettable excesses') halted them as they finished loading the wagon. Leary seemed angry enough to start laying into them but Sam persuaded him otherwise.

The lieutenant in charge was sheepish, perhaps chastened by what his troops had been responsible for. Unfortunately, it only made him more determined to obey his orders to the letter. He 'insisted' they come quietly.

All the time Sam was thinking of the Doctor. Of what he was getting himself into and wondering whether she would ever get there in time. In time for what, she wasn't quite sure, but with him it would be big. And loud. And probably nasty.

***

Percival had them locked up. Sam wasn't surprised. That woman didn't know what she wanted. Her control of the city was going to be very shaky until she found a way of proving she was still up for it. Sending troops out to kill workers wasn't exactly going to endear her to the populace. She was going to have to make one hell of a concession to keep herself in power. Undoubtedly, she and Leary were going to be part of that concession. Amazing how quickly politicians could get back to work, wasn't it?

As she sat, she watched Leary sleeping on the bunk. It was the same room in which she had sat with the Doctor all those days ago. As he slept, his mind seemed caught up in the horrors he had witnessed. He was writhing and moaning and jerking. She felt pity for him, and that just got her thinking about Ben again.

Sam had this feeling that everything was going to go horribly wrong.

It was clear their temporary alliance with the Exec was over. She was working to a new agenda. Putting on her amateur psychiatrist's hat, Sam diagnosed Percival as having a weak ego, fear-of-failure motivation and distinctly paranoid delusional tendencies. The world would behave the way she told it to. Reality would just have to fit in where it could.

Mind you, the Doctor had been maddeningly vague, hadn't he? What did he mean, telling Leary'something big'? Talk like that just made you nervous, put a black cloud over you as you waited for the sky to fall in. She could understand Percival refusing to give it credence. It did seem as if it was all over, didn't it.

Except that, when the Doctor said something big was going to happen, something bigalways happened.

What was she going to do?

***

The lake. The crystal lake. You are walking again. A great sheet of glass. In the distance, a black smudge, the faces stretching up to the roof of the cavern. Price is with you. And the Doctor. And Sam. You know it's all going wrong, that something is there, under the glass, something alive. You saw it, you just don't want to believe it.

It's living and it knows you. It knows everything about you. Under the ice.

And, as Price and the Doctor and Sam are plucked into the darkness by giant bloody hands, it seems to speak to you saying, 'Fear me, little man. I'm on my way.'

***

Leary screamed in his sleep. Sam jumped, aware that she had been dropping off into her own little dreamworld. She put her arms around his giant shoulders. His eyes opened and stared at the cell, uncomprehending.

'It's OK,' she said soothingly.'It's OK.'

He clutched her, brawny arms crushing her into his chest. 'No, Sam,' he moaned,'It's not OK.'

Percival came for them about four hours later. Ready for the rally, Sam supposed.

The lock buzzed and the door swung open. Percival entered the cell.'Come on, you two. Let's get this over with. Give me your word you won't do anything to disrupt this meeting and I'll let you do what you want. I'll even give you a wagon to get out to the mountains.'

'Just keep it short,' said Sam, aware that they had been given a chance. She glanced at Leary, who had gone very, very quiet.

Percival led them, without guards, to the lift. Sam knew she was supposed to call it an elevator but, like calling pavements sidewalks, old habits died hard. Leary huffed and puffed by her side. He had recovered from his nightmare. Considering that a day ago he was a half-mad fugitive on the run from a whole city - the population of which he was about to confront - he was surprisingly cool. He'd have to shave that beard off, though. She'd have a word. What had he meant,'It's not OK'?

Even in the lift she could hear the noise from the plaza. Thousands of people all talking at once. It just needed a PA and a load of wallies in vests off their boxes and it could have been one of those 'parties' Sam used to swear to her mum and dad she hadn't been to.

Once they were out of the park she saw them. She had had no idea

there were so many. Proxima City had always seemed so deserted. Wave upon wave of people, their noise gradually subsiding as they realised the show was about to begin. Then again, five thousand people would hardly have dented one bank of Wembley Stadium.

Percival's need for approval wasn't absolute. She still lined the short walk to Central Plaza with troops. Just in case they rushed her. Which in Sam's opinion they were perfectly entitled to do. Percival would not be receiving her vote of confidence, that was for sure.

The colony execs stood in their suits on a raised platform. They looked hot and uncomfortable, eyeing the crowd nervously. Probably expected to be attacked at any minute. Sam found herself giggling. It was like prize day at school. Percival had even set up a little podium garlanded with microphones.

The silence couldn't last. And it didn't. Voices started up, barracking, whistling, even a few cheers. Something tickled Sam's spine. A feeling. Something big, the Doctor had said. And here they all were, ripe for harvesting, all in one nice easily digestible lump. She felt her palms sweating. These horrible clothes felt all stiff and uncomfortable.

The noise increased. Sam smelled body odour and fear and anger, the stink of the human race. Instinctively, and if she had been thinking straight she would have been so annoyed with herself, she held out a hand to Leary. He encircled it gently with his giant palm and gave her a squeeze. Where was the feminist now, running off to the closest handy father figure? Still, it felt good and there were only five thousand people watching.

Percival reached the podium and, in the midst of a sea of noise, raised her arms for silence. Did she really have courage, Sam thought, or was she just so blind she was convinced she could do anything?

Yet silence came. Percival would have waited for ever for it. Despite what she had done to them, they wanted their leader, wanted to believe in her again. At the front edge of the crowd, Sam could see what was obviously their delegation. A group of men and women in overalls, looking tired and dusty. One man had his arm in a sling. Next to him, a dumpy middle-aged woman nervously rolled a sheaf of papers. Sam remembered. The Face-Eater had killed most of their representatives off. No wonder Percival had delayed admitting what was going on. This would be a hastily picked group, probably those least unwilling to face

her. They wouldn't know how she would deal with them. Certainly, she was an imposing figure, with her short, red hair and iron-grey suit.

At the moment, the Colony Exec was looking, no staring, out into the crowd. They were waiting, expectant.

'Citizens of Proxima 2!' she yelled, hardly needing the mikes. "The crisis is over! We have crushed those who wished to destroy us!'

She waited, perhaps expecting cheers. There were none. They might fear her, but they certainly didn't respect her. Now, why did Sam have the uncomfortable feeling she was being lined up for something? What was this?

The oratory continued. Its dead echo boomed from the buildings around the plaza. 'I know it has been difficult. Unfair even. We are not perfect. These past days have been hard. And hard times call for hard measures. You have grievances, I know that. And I give you my word that I will listen to you all! There is no excuse for the way you have been treated!'

A few shouts of dissent from the crowd.

'All I can offer, all I can give you,' said Percival - and Sam could almost hear the group-management seminar training in her voice - 'is my word. I have acted only for the good of the colony. Only for what I know to be right.'

'What about de Winter?'yelled some wag. These words set up a chorus of whispering and muttering.

Percival paused. 'For him, there are no excuses. I was wrong. A mistake was made. I accept that. Can you?' This last question was jabbed out at each and every one of them. Percival strained to see, to try to look every last colonist in the eye.'We are the first humans in history to live outside our own solar system. We knew it would be difficult. There are those, those who chose not to accept this monumental challenge, but were happy to sit and judge our efforts, who said it would be impossible.' Another pause. Another haughty stare. Then, in a frenzy, Percival jabbed at her own chest.'Not me! Not me and not you!'

At last, she got what she had been after. The clapping started slowly, almost reluctantly. Then it rose. Layer upon layer upon layer until there

was nothing but clapping. Sam had to admit, Percival was good. Applause. And cheering. A good five minutes of it. Percival took it all in. When she was ready, she began again. Here comes the kicker, thought Sam.

'We go on. We will not be beaten. And those who stand in our way will be crushed. Let me tell you, I will show you now what it means to try to break this colony. I will show you what we do to those who would destroy us.'

Sam turned. Behind her, a row of helmeted guards held their weapons high. The cow. The bitch. She had lied. All the time she had lied.

'I bring you Leary, the murderer! And his accomplice! These are the people who would destroy what we have fought for. These are the enemy within. The fifth column who think they can break us. Look at them. Look!' Her voice became a shriek and Sam could hear nothing except its sting and the blood that pounded in her head.

Guns pushed her forward, her hand still fused with Leary's.

The crowd were stunned. Silent. Taking in her words. Something, some quote began to run around inside Sam's head: 'A person is very, very intelligent. People are very, very stupid. A person is very, very intelligent. People are very, very stupid.' From where?

The crowd began to grow noisy. Insults began to fly at them, first one, then many. And then it was all of them.

Sam felt so weak and faint under the barrage of hate that she could barely register it. How could she have been so stupid? How could she have allowed this to happen? Where was the Doctor when she needed him? Even the ground shook with the crowd's violence.

Percival began it. One word. That was all, over and over again.'Kill!' she breathed, like a chant.'Kill! Kill!'

And then the crowd followed, a whisper, then a murmur, then a shout. Baying for blood.'Kill! Kill! Kill!'

Someone forced her to her knees. Cold metal jabbed into the back of her head. How could the colonists fall for it? Why didn't they understand? Or was it something else? Was it that they just didn't want

to know? Where was Ben? He could sort it, he knew how to do it.

'This is how we deal with those who would betray us!' Percival screamed and the crowd went ape.

Leary squeezed her hand. 'It'll be quick,' he shouted over the noise of the mob. 'I promise.'

'Shut up,' she shouted back, sick with fear. The ground shook again and the 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' became 'Boom! Boom! Boom!' in her mind. She closed her eyes. This is it, then, this is it.

The shouting became screaming and the ground moved beneath them. For a moment Sam thought it was the gun going off and she was seeing herself falling on to the concrete. Then Leary was pulling her up. She opened her eyes.

Something had blasted its way up through the plaza. Massive, like a gigantic tree trunk, ridged and uneven. Her vision cleared and the fright was replaced by awe. That was no trunk. It was the limb of a living creature. Up, up it stretched into the sky, punching its way through the sides of towers, concrete and bodies dropping on to the screaming crowd like hailstones.

OK, Doctor, you were right, some part of her brain was saying. That's pretty big.

Chapter Eighteen
The Friend Catcher

The ground shook. The vibration juddered up through the Doctor's shoes. He clutched the worn ridges in the side of the tunnel, aware that more was to come. Cheeky Monkey chittered and copied his actions. Dust fell from the smooth curve over his head.

When it came, it passed like a wave under the ground. Some large transference of energy, tectonic plates shifting. Except if this was an earthquake (or proximaquake) it had an incredible sense of timing. The Doctor had the uncomfortable feeling that the second stage had begun. He just hoped Leary had been able to get to the Installation in time to prepare them.

He looked down the tunnel. The crystals embedded in its sides lit the rock a ruddy orange, enabling him to see how it stretched monotonously forward and back. The Face-Eater had been busy. Not only had it hollowed out Basement Seven of the Castanedes Tower, it had set up some kind of dimensional gate to give instant access to the mountains. The Doctor and Cheeky Monkey hadn't been in the city for some time now.

The air was distinctly different here. Dry, thick, and tingling as if charged with static electricity. He could feel his hair crackling.

The ground in this tunnel was uneven, threatening, with outcrops of sharp rock. The shape-shifters hadn't walked into the city. The smooth ridges on the walls with its scuffed markings indicated they had moved in a different way. The Doctor imagined them scuttling at great speeds along the walls, limbs clacking like a spider's, hauling whatever it was they had extracted from their prey. He shuddered, hoping they had dealt with all the ones the Face-Eater had commissioned. If they caught him down here... Cheeky Monkey was moving more quickly than he was, able to use the shape-shifters' ridges. It was painfully picking its way along the floor, ignoring the wicked-looking spars that glittered under its feet.

The Proximan native was worrying him. Every now and then, it would drop like a stone off the wall. The Doctor would bend over it only to see it had gone into some kind of trance. He presumed it was the race-pull, the instinct inside the little creature to surrender its identity to the whole. This

trance could be similar to his own powers of self-hypnosis, a way to sidestep unpleasant situations. After some minutes, Cheeky Monkey's little black eyes would clear and it would bound up to the wall again, chiding the Doctor for not keeping up.

What disturbed him was that the spaces between these fade-outs were getting shorter and that each time it was taking the creature longer to recover. How long before the poor thing became totally subsumed? No wonder it was in a hurry.

The ground rumbled again. What could it mean? Was the Face-Eater causing an earthquake in the city? Was it powerful enough literally to move mountains?

Leary had mentioned the great quartz lake, had seen something moving beneath it. Clearly this was the Face-Eater's physical manifestation. It was an ancient creature... Through the Proximans' entire history, just how big had it grown?

This tunnel business was getting on his nerves. If the Face-Eater was going to attack him, he wished it would get on with it. He was too confined here, closed in. And the tunnel was too long. It was time for something different. How far inside this mountain was he going to have to go? Something pricked at his mind - he felt it, like an injection. A memory of another mountain, it felt like centuries ago.

Cheeky Monkey fell off the wall again. The Doctor winced as it bounced heavily on a sharp outcrop of rock. He raced over to it. Pink blood oozed from a deep scratch on its right shoulder. The Proximan's eyelids fluttered, the pupils rolled up under their sockets. Instinctively, the Doctor reached into his pocket for something to bind the wound. And found the object. His fingers curled round the heavy weight they found there.

The blue crystal of Metebelis Three. That was what he needed to clear Cheeky Monkey's mind. Lucky he'd had it with him.

He stopped and stared at the chunky jewel sitting in his palm. It reallywas lucky he'd had it with him.

Something rustled in the tunnel. He snapped his head round but saw nothing. Just an image, like an imprint on his retinas, as if it had just stepped out of sight as he turned. Thin legs, a whole mass of them. Not human. More like... eight-legs. Crawling over the walls, hiding in the

shadowy crevices of the rock face. He felt his hearts increase their speed, thumping away inside his thin chest. He felt his blood circulating inside him, a delicate system of dams and reservoirs.

Better get Cheeky Monkey sorted out if he could. The Face-Eater was obviously trying to disrupt his senses. Just illusions, that was all, just illusions.

He held the blue crystal over the Proximan's face. This would have to be done quickly. The Queen was mad, she would do anything to get the crystal back. He would have to face her, though he knew it would destroy him. He swallowed. Was he ready for this?

The crystal felt warm in his hand. It seemed to contain that inner glow that he had never been able to isolate. Back in the lab. The UNIT lab. Where Jo had sent the crystal back to him. Something was wrong. Something wasn't right. He was relieved when Cheeky Monkey's eyes returned to some semblance of normality. The crystal was helping the little fellow to get better. It stared, taking in the soothing phosphorescence.

What was it? What couldn't he see? He knew he was being duped in some way. If only he didn't have to face the Queen in her mountain fortress. He was too frightened. His body would receive an overdose of radiation. He would die. It had happened before.

He was cold, the fear tearing him apart. He didn't want to die. Sam would have been all right. She was immortal. No, that wasn't right. Sarah, that was it. It was hiding on her back. How his hearts were squeezing away at him. Too tight inside his chest. Freezing him. Shaking. Teeth chattering. He was going to die.

Cheeky Monkey batted the crystal out of his hands. As the cold and the pain in his chest became too much to bear, he heard it skitter across the tunnel floor. Shaking, he stared into the Proximan's eyes. He fell forward, arms out to prevent him landing on his little saviour. He breathed deeply, feeling the pain subside.

He knelt there, the rough floor digging into his knees. How easy it had been to trap him, how little effort it had taken. And this life he was dismissing as 'the Proximan creature' had saved him. He looked around. Of course there was no blue glow in the thin light, no blue crystal of Metebelis Three. Just Cheeky Monkey staring at him, willing him on.

Suddenly he felt intensely weary. Another trick, or just time catching up with him? It didn't matter. He tried to look away from Cheeky Monkey's burrowing eyes. He couldn't. Thin hands grasped his temples.

Then, as quickly as a finger snapping, he was inside the Proximan mind. No, he thought, panicked. No. I'm not ready for this. I don't want to give myself up. Don't make me lose myself.

***

Do not be afraid. We won't let you drown. You must see us, how we became. All times are One Time, all lives are our Life. Face-Eater. The Opener of the Way.

We were once many, disunited, building That who would protect us. We gave you power, the ability to make all One when we were threatened. No disparity, no chaos, all life deciding as One. We gave you one of Us, the life force that made You more than machine, buried in the quartz field. We named you Centraliser.

You changed. Became greedy. You tried to stop Me, tried to terminate my function. I adapted, took more units. Took Faces. Under the clear rock I grew, feeding from the others. Became One. I took everything.

No! Not all.You have not taken me. And you will not take Doctor. We live in you but are not you. My ancestors contained you once, we will do it again. Be afraid, Face-Eater. You are not immortal.You will not take us.

I already have.

Doctor! Leave now. Break it now!

***

Light and pain and noise swamped his brain. Something changed. He felt severed.

He was flying backwards. His back burned as he hit the rock wall and he slid to a lump on the floor. Cheeky Monkey was thrashing and chittering wildly, caught in the throes of some fit. The Doctor crawled to aid him. Was this what went through their minds all the time? How could they stay sane?

'Cheeky Monkey!' he shouted at the thrashing creature, aware of the ludicrousness of the name Joan Betts had given it. The creature that had forced its consciousness upon him was no animal. Painfully slowly, he managed to still its violence. He wondered how much the Proximan had sacrificed to allow him to see what the Face-Eater was.

Another doomsday machine. For all its gloating cunning, for all its mystery and strength, it was just another weapon that had got out of control and turned on its owners. Slowly, Cheeky Monkey's shaking subsided.

The Doctor hauled himself up to begin the long walk again. It was a machine. A machine that had grown too big. Perhaps Cheeky Monkey had shown him a weakness, risked its own sanity to help him out and save itself. The machine was linked to some kind of ancient Proximan animal. It must have grown in the centuries it had been buried beneath the mountain, sucking in the life and energy of the entire planet until it was dry. Storing a planet's resources for centuries.

A creature that harvested life, that drank its blood and stole its identity... Perhaps it needed these elements to re-energise itself. That was the most likely answer, that ole black magic. Blood, sacrifice and large amounts of psychic energy. The Face-Eater was telepathic. With the combined energies of a whole race it could tap into and disrupt human thought patterns, augmenting deep buried fears and primal terrors. No doubt, if he'd had the chance, he could have had a field day researching bad dreams and nightmares in the colony. Stealing identity to aid its own physical manifestation. It fed upon memory and need.

What did he need? How could it disrupt him?

Cheeky Monkey had gone up ahead again but now had stopped. It waved maniacally at him. Trying to shake off the effects of the fright, he picked his way through the rocks to catch up with it. He would have to be careful. More illusions were undoubtedly on their way. And he didn't want to rely on Cheeky Monkey to dispel them for him.

The tunnel had finally ended. Cheeky Monkey leapt on to his shoulder. He winced.'You're really too heavy for this kind of thing,' he said. 'But if it makes you feel better.'

He held the creature steady, as much for the reassuring touch of another

living creature as for any service he might be providing.

He had reached the quartz lake. It stretched out ahead of him like some vast sea of ice. Brilliant colours shone in its depths. Some instinct made him turn and look back up the tunnel, perhaps preparing his escape route. He wasn't surprised when he realised there was no tunnel, just a shimmering, glittering hole through which he could see the basement back in the Castanedes Tower. The whole journey here had been an illusion. Cheeky Monkey clicked its tongue. Its tiny hands clutched at the Doctor's sleeve.

There was something very definitely moving beneath the quartz. The surface was rippling as if it was the liquid it resembled. He saw something big, black and rubbery shifting untold depths beneath his feet. The hairs on Cheeky Monkey's back rose up like little spikes. It bared its teeth and hissed.

The Face-Eater was here. Perhaps it always had been. The physical animal. It had needed only the barest fragments of those taken by its servitors to awaken it from its deep sleep. It was churning below the surface, through the quartz as if it was not rock but water.

He couldn't see it clearly and for that he was thankful. He caught glimpses: a gigantic leathery hide that shivered and phased in and out of view, wet membranous sheets that dripped like a newly born calf.

Not a bad simile, he thought. The original animal selected by the ancient Proximans for development had probably been their equivalent of a cow. Not that even they would have recognised it now. The mutation caused by the absorption of almost all the organic matter on the planet was beyond any deconstruction. White edges of bone or teeth or claws, the suckers of inconceivable tentacles. A real Bug-Eyed Monster, as they would have said at UNIT. How on earth was he going to stop it?

Cheeky Monkey was digging its paws into his shoulder. 'Sorry, old chap,' he said.'I've got to let you go.'

He bent over to let it down. To his surprise, the Proximan leapt from him and bounded away across the churning quartz. The Doctor watched as his companion disappeared into the dark. He was alone, only this creaking, writhing Face-Eater for company.

Unless this too was an illusion - the worst thing he could imagine. In

which case, how was he going to know what was real and what wasn't?

He couldn't. There was no way. He would just have to deal with the world as it appeared, try to recognise the creaks and cracks as he found them. It hadn't made any physical attacks upon him as yet so perhaps he wasn't as powerless as he had imagined. If illusions were all it had left he was in with a chance.

He walked on to the undulating quartz. The rock was cracking like thunder far below and the surface was periodically smashed open by some mushrooming abstract upthrust of glass. 'Should have brought my skates,' he said to himself.

To his left, he spotted a kind of outcrop on to the quartz, like a granite platform. Basalt columns stretched up from its base to the ceiling of this gigantic ice rink, like thick rock tree trunks.

Immediately he saw the crevices in two of the columns he knew what they had been for. They were man-size holes, empty now, dark scars in the rock. So this was the home of the shape-shifters. They could have lain dormant in the rock for centuries, waiting for their alarm clock to go off.

This was the first clue he had found that pointed to some kind of roost for the Face-Eater. He hurried to the outcrop. He caught himself as he reached the edge. He remembered what Leary had said he had seen.

He looked up, and he felt disgusted. They were all there, crystallised, grown into the rock. Joan Betts, Ben Fuller. And more. He guessed at some: the Asian woman could be Dr Rupinder, an older Caucasian could only be Professor Coors, the Hispanic had to be Clark. Not inside the stone but the stone itself, their faces imprinted into its seams. The essence that had been removed, the identity that made them individual. All to sate the appetite of this giant vampire. An academic question in the circumstances, but he couldn't help wondering just how many it needed to animate itself. Just how much telepathic energy and blood and life had it needed to fasten itself here, corporeal and sick?

The rock seams were humming, almost alive. This made some kind of sense. He was in some sort of control centre, some kind of physical anchor for the creature that squirmed beneath the quartz.

He stepped on to the outcrop. Immediately, an intense, numbing cold

gripped his hands. He cried out and dropped to his knees. Holding up his hands, he saw they were covered in a fine coating of crystals, like icing sugar. The cold started on his face. He brushed himself down, already seeing a new layer starting to form.

'Welcome, Doctor,' came a voice that boomed around the giant cavern. The Doctor felt cold and alone and tired. The voice, or perhaps many voices, was neither male nor female - instead it was as devoid of life as the stars.

'I pity you,' the Doctor said softly. 'You have lost so much.' He looked around at the hanging stalactites that hung from the roof of the cavern. 'Can you understand that?' he asked. 'And are you capable of feeling what those words mean?'

'I understand everything,' said the voice. 'Even you, Time Lord.'

The cold on his hands and face was increasing. Despite constant brushing, he was starting to crystallise. He felt like a cake. A process had been activated upon his arrival, to remove his identity and trap it. His self would be sealed into these columns like a fly in amber.

He realised now how the Face-Eater would trap him. It knew what he needed, had known it all along, ever since that first communion at the rock. He needed to be himself. The Doctor. He had fought so hard to retain his identity; his biggest fear was to lose it. He saw himself as a hollowed-out cylinder, a container for the essence, rarer than gold, that was the Doctor. The Face-Eater wanted to drain that essence.

'Stop this process,' he warned, wondering how the creature would react to his threat.

It clearly wasn't that impressed, as the cold moved in further, clamping and clawing at his insides.

'You're making a mistake,' he tried.'Absorbing me will only cause you damage. I'm not human. Stealing my identity will be far more complex than you believe. I don't think you're up to it.'

The Face-Eater laughed. A gloating, humourless laugh that threatened his crystallising ear drums. The Doctor fell to his knees, his head full of ice.'So arrogant, little man?'

Through a thickening tongue, the Doctor forced out his words. 'Oh, I'm full of myself. You think you're the only gestalt life form I've encountered? Never believe your own
PR.'

'You hope to defeat me? I who compose the sum of an entire race and its history? What fight can you offer? You should see what I'm doing to the city, to your friends. It's hopeless.'

The Doctor smiled, his lips cracking.'I'm not going to fight. I'm going to make you understand. And, before you start talking about an entire race, you're in for a shock. There's one little creature who still defies you. You're not invincible. That's your problem, all this talk of fighting and conquering. You absorb me and I'll change you. And those you have swallowed will help me. Joan! Coors! Clark! All of you. Whatever it has taken belongs to you! It cannot be resisted but it can be changed! You can change it!'

Strangely, he heard liquid sluicing violently over rock, somewhere beyond the cavern wall. He had to get off the platform before it claimed him. He wasn't ready. He needed time.

'Your words are meaningless. I will take you and I will grow. I must have everything.You are mine, little man.'

The Doctor marshalled his thoughts. He forced himself to look inward. He travelled inside himself, deep into his own identity. 'Not so little, I think you'll find,' he said, rolling in his own dust towards the quartz. 'You see, I'm a gestalt too. Not one man but many, with many more to come. I cannot be distilled, not properly. You'II spit me out, you won't like the way I'll taste. And when you do you won't even know what I've done to you.'

He felt its grip -weaken, momentarily. He had hit home, or at least confused it. Using this one slim advantage, he scrabbled his way off the platform. He hit the quartz hard, feeling its needles scratch into his warming hands and face.

The basalt columns were glowing. He sensed, rather than felt, the creature beneath slowing, losing its force. Its vibrations weren't nearly as violent.

The faces in the rocks, the humans taken by the Centraliser, were

becoming clearer, more distinct. The Doctor hoped his appeal to the absorbed latent humanity would be enough. Whatever was left of the human victims was asserting their identities on the Face-Eater, imposing their individual will - it had to be.

'No Doctor,' came the voice.'Nice try. But I am not the sum of my parts. I am the whole.'

The basalt columns exploded. The human imprints burst into bullets of stone. The faces in the rocks shattered into a million glittering shards. They fell with spattering echoes over the platform.

The Face-Eater had removed the humans from itself. Rather than allow itself to be altered it had simply destroyed that part of itself, as a man might amputate an infected limb.

Had he done enough? Had he managed to damage it? It hadn't taken his bait. He had expected it to try to steal him. He would have been lost but he knew he could have softened its murderous tendencies. For all its psychopathy it was simply a machine, a machine that had forgotten its own programming.

The Face-Eater howled in pain. The Doctor stood up and ran.

'Doctor?' came a voice in front of him. It was Sam. She was lying in the quartz debris, face tight with pain. 'Help me...'

What was she doing here? She could ruin everything.

Except, of course, it wasn't Sam. He stopped and observed. She was a picture of pain, clutching herself, rolling around in agony. But she wasn't quite right. Her features were unformed, a rough sketch, almost a grotesque cartoon. The hair was too blonde, the limbs too long, the face smooth and unlined. Like a doll. Nasty, but he had seen worse. It was a pitiful attempt. He had affected the Face-Eater after all. Was this all it had left?

With a dreadful realisation, he knew he had to go back on to the platform. This was where the machine existed, this was its control panel. He had to strike while he had the machine on the ropes.

He turned away from Sam, demonstrating his contempt for this cheap trick. The platform was carpeted with debris from the smashed columns.

Would it still attempt to take him? There was no choice.

Quartz blasted around him. A tremendous push under his feet lifted the glass floor and he found himself hurtling through the air. He hit the ground hard and the wind rushed out of him. A great stench washed over him, making him retch. Clear crystals thumped to the ground around him. He reached out a hand to steady himself and realised he had sprained his wrist. He cried out in pain. Something very large cast its shadow over him. He rolled over to see a tentacle the size and thickness of a tower block rising into the air.

The Face-Eater had decided not to absorb him after all. It had decided just to kill him.

Chapter Nineteen
Waking Up

That cow, that witch. That mad, murdering paranoid psychotic bitch.

Even as the tentacles laid waste to Proxima City, in good old fifties B-movie fashion, Sam was still reserving her anger exclusively for Percival and her betrayal. It clouded her mind, shrouded her thinking.

'Wake up!' she registered Leary yelling at her. The screams of the dying colonists suddenly became real to her. The insanely wide limb was grinding its way around the hole that was once Central Plaza. Bodies were still dropping from the sky into which they had been flung, rubble falling everywhere. Colonists were running blindly, lost to everything except terror.

More explosions went off as she saw other tentacles erupt over the tops of even the tallest towers. How big was this thing? Could it really stretch from the mountains to here? That would make it... beyond comprehension. What did its face look like?

'Sam!' Leary bellowed and hauled her to her feet. Their would-be executioners were long gone, running like everyone else. She winced as more rubble fell around them. A man, a Chinese-looking man, disappeared howling beneath a wall of concrete that buried him not twenty metres away. Instinctively, she ran to help but Leary yanked her back. 'Leave him!' he snapped.'We have to get to the Doctor.'

There was too much going on to think. The tentacles were systematically reducing the city to rubble, cutting through the concrete buildings like butter. All their work, Sam thought, all those years, just gone. She briefly recalled her criticism of the colony when she first arrived. How she had wished it destroyed. The appropriate guilt kicked in.

'Sam! Wake up!' shouted Leary.'We have to find a wagon.'

Yes, yes, of course. Help the Doctor, out there, trying to do it all on his own once again. How could he possibly overcome something like this? He would need his trusty companion. Another building shattered like a vase beneath the Face-Eater's entwining limbs.

Sam dodged the falling concrete as she followed Leary out of the ruined

plaza. Leary was right. They had to get to the Doctor.

Out of the immediate range of the tentacle, she found she had time to think. Where could they find a wagon? One of the security vans perhaps. Would it make it to the mountains? Would the Doctor even be there yet? And then, that thought, the one that she had known was hiding there waiting for the least appropriate time to surface.

She screeched to a halt. The ground shuddered beneath her as somewhere in the city another limb burst up towards the sky.'Leary!' she shouted.'Wait.'

They were in a side street, the road beside them undulating like a snake. Impatiently, he slid to a halt, almost toppling over. 'What? We've got to get out of here.'

'We can't help the Doctor,' she said, hating her own words. 'We've got to stop Percival.'

Leary wiped dust from his forehead, his chest heaving with exertion. 'What? What are you talking about?'

'She's going to activate your satellite. Fire a nuclear bomb into the atmosphere.'

He stared at her. Although physically nothing happened, she understood his jaw would be dropping. 'You're joking.
Nuclear bomb? She's probably dead by now.'

'Yeah, but if she's not, she'll be heading into the Installation to set it off. I only hope Horton had the sense to disable it. We have to stop her.'

'You're saying we leave the Doctor.'

Sam took a deep breath, feeling his words sink in. 'Yes. I know him. He'll make it. We have to trust him.'

'No.'

Sam thumped him in the chest. "There's no choice! If Percival sets off that bomb everyone will die whether he succeeds or not. This way we're giving him a chance.'

Ignore that little voice telling you that maybe, just maybe, a neutron bomb was the only way to destroy the monster after all, that the Doctor wasn't going to make it...

The building behind them shattered as something very heavy thumped into it. Sam and Leary ducked into the doorway as an entire floor plummeted past. They ducked as its remains blasted around them. Pretty soon, Sam thought, they were going to get themselves crushed. 'We have to get to the Installation, now,' she said.

Leary glared at her in something like hatred. Didn't he realise how much she despised herself already? They didn't have time for this. She would go on her own if she had to.

***

In a way, Percival had always known it was going to come to this. The last stand, the last-ditch effort. One way or the other, she was going to preserve her city.

The colony was not finished, not yet. She had done her best, no one could argue that. Even the decision to execute Leary and Sam in public had been rational and correct. They had to die, the times demanded it. It had been the only way to satisfy the needs of her people. It would have worked. History would have vindicated her.

Then this. It wasn't fair. The odds were too great. Nothing could have prepared her for this onslaught. Once again, she had been undermined by foul play.

The game wasn't over, though, oh no. Not by a long chalk.

The elevator was still working. Helen Percival prised a pistol from the shaking hand of one of her guards and then dismissed the lot. They looked to her for orders but she had none to give. It didn't matter now. They would have to look after themselves.

The doors hissed closed and she was heading down to the lowest level. Surprisingly, she found herself smiling. In a way, she was glad. The worst-case scenario had occurred but she was still up for the task.With her free hand, she retrieved the coding sequencer from her jacket pocket. It was the size of an egg, a round LED screen with but one function: to instruct POSSAT to fire a missile containing a neutron

warhead over the city. The final detonation she would handle manually. Right to the end she would impose her will, her identity, on the fate of the colony.

The thought of her actions calmed her. She no longer worried about the spectre of Chung that had haunted her for so long. It hadn't been the shape-shifter: it had been her own doubt and weakness. No more.

The elevator reached the bottom of the Installation. As she marched into the deserted corridors, the bunker shook around her. Let it. In a matter of minutes she would make it stop. The monster was already dead.

The gate to her inner sanctum was open. Someone was here. Horton, hunched in the flickering strip lights over a terminal, poring over the notepad Helen remembered scribbling on a thousand years ago. He was large in the tiny room, his bulk clumsy inside its cramped interior.

He spun round, the password command unopened on the screen. His eyes widened with fear. She felt herself swell with pride. He shrank before her destiny. 'You can't do it,' he said. 'You can't.'

Helen shot him. The bolt hit her secretary full in the chest and propelled him backwards over the chair. She stared at his corpse for a full minute. Weak. Unfit for the post. Should never have come on this mission. Like so many.

She inputted the command codes, then began to type the sequence that would align POSSAT.

***

The Doctor was crawling towards the platform. Behind him, the quartz was melting as the Face-Eater's physical manifestation burrowed its way upward.

He had damaged it, wounded it, but it was still more than capable of obliterating him, grinding him into the melting glass. The tentacles were blind, unable to locate such small prey, unused to the movement.You should really take regular exercise, the Doctor thought to himself, trying to keep his mind off the futility of his position. Every couple of centuries or so.

The beast was unbelievably massive. Its roots might extend halfway

across the planet, buried deep under the ground. He wondered which bit of it was coming for him. The noise was deafening and he knew he wasn't going to come through this unscathed, even if he won. The pain in his wrist was agonising, reminding him of the pain he had sat through when Leary had tied him to the chair.

The Face-Eater was in some kind of frenzy, its kinetic energy turning the quartz into a literal lake, raising the temperature to oven-like proportions.

The Doctor flopped a hand on to the edge of the platform. He breathed out with relief just as a tentacle, or perhaps a tentacle's tentacle, wrapped itself like a snake around his leg.

'No no no!' he yelled as it lifted him lopsidedly into the air. Over the unbelievable din he heard, or imagined he heard, an immense screech of triumph. The lake flashed along below him as he rose up. Even now he found himself searching for options.

The heat was frying him alive. The cavern swirled in a blur around him.

Something flashed past his eyes. Something white and furry. Then another, and another. The tentacle convulsed and he lurched sickeningly. Falling. His neck snapped back with the speed. What was going on? He looked at his trapped leg and the limb that wrapped it.

A Proximan native was scuttling up the tentacle towards him, digging its claws into the rubbery mass as the limb lashed and snapped. The Doctor felt the bones inside his body rattle. He looked down and saw the ground heading for him much, much too quickly. He shut his eyes, waiting for the impact that would smash him apart.

It never came. Or perhaps it had come and he hadn't felt it. No, don't be silly. He opened his eyes. The tentacle that held him was flapping jerkily, the Proximan native tearing its flesh to shreds as if it was nothing but wax. Other, smaller limbs were trying to pull the Proximan off but there was a feebleness to its attempts, as if it lacked conviction. The Proximan, its fur caked with tentacle pulp, was so far inside the swaying trunk it had almost disappeared. There was a jump and then the Doctor was in free fall. He hit the ground with a thud. How many more times?

There were hundreds of the little Proximans, freeing themselves from their cells in the wall. The Doctor could only watch as hundreds of them swarmed over the Face-Eater, eating into it like acid.

Occasionally one would be brushed off and dashed down into the soup below, but on the whole they were easily the victors in this apparently uneven struggle. Don't try to understand where they've found the strength. Don't try to explain, just finish the job.

Feeling like he was going to regenerate through bruising alone, he dragged himself once more towards the control platform.

***

Two hundred miles above the planet of Proxima 2, POSSAT swung calmly round in its geostationary orbit, an ugly chunky sphere of metal. The satellite was calm, unhurried, unmindful of the chaos unfolding below. Inside, in its tiny command centre, a previously unused program chattered into life. Soundlessly, metal slid against metal as the warhead was manoeuvred into its place at the head of the STRIKE missile. Locking gates hissed closed, sealing the payload to its delivery engine.

Silent panels slid open, retros fired to position the angular missile head over the surface far below. POSSAT was ready.

Its systems control prepared itself for the coding sequence. There was no anticipation here, no sweaty fingers poised over buttons. Just a patient, humming computer, waiting for a launch signal.

***

As she dashed through the corridors of Level Four, Sam had the uncomfortable feeling they were going to be too late. Had her little spat with Leary cost them the vital few seconds they needed to stop Percival?

'Which way?' she asked breathlessly, staring wildly around at the maze of dimly lit corridors. The Installation was shaking like the inside of one of those flight simulator machines.

Her newly reset nose was pulsing, dotting her vision with purple spots. Her lungs felt as if they were on fire. It seemed the molecular thingies she'd had inside her really had gone. Great, definitely mortal, ready to get fried in a neutron airburst.

Leary pelted past her down the left-hand corridor. That answered her question pretty convincingly. She followed, hoping her choice to leave

the Doctor had been correct. Don't let us down, she breathed. I'll make sure this part is done properly. Just come back alive.

Leary halted outside what looked to Sam like a hole in the wall. A metal gate swung out into the corridor. Through her exhausted eyes she saw only glimpses: Horton lying sprawled across the floor, a terminal speeding through a series of bright numbers, Percival turning in her chair to face them, holding aloft a little electronic pad shining red in the gloom. A gun.

Using the last of her momentum, Sam threw herself past the little alcove. She felt the electricity warm the back of her neck as Percival fired.

'Give up,Percival!' Sam heard Leary shout as she cannoned into the wall. She dropped to her knees, forcing her heart to slow down. Another shot, and concrete fragments burst over her.

Sam turned to see Leary pressing himself into the wall next to the alcove. He had turned his head sideways, trying to peek into Percival's cubbyhole. 'You'll kill us all!' he yelled.

This is no time to be stating the bleedin' obvious, Sam thought. Percival had clearly jumped off the deep end, was off her box, out of her tree and gone to live with monkeys.

'I'm in command here!' the Colony Exec shouted.'I will not be swayed from my duty. History will vindicate me.'

'Face it Percival, it's all over!' Sam shouted. 'There isn't a colony left to save!'

Nothing. No response.

Leary looked round to Sam. He nodded to her. Was this going to be some kind of plan? 'We're out of time,' he said. 'Just make sure you stop her.'

Sam barely had time to frown, wondering what he meant, when Leary leapt into the alcove.

***

Time freezes. It may be a hangover from your madness but it seems you

knew this. All the other things, the caverns, the faces, the hunting, the confusion, the Doctor, the creature from the mountain, all elements leading directly to this single focused moment in the great, nightmare charge of Time. You feel empty and clear.

Your own disintegration reflects the disintegration of the colony. All that has worked on you, chipped away at you, tried to destroy you. In this single instant you are the colony, the focal point at which all destinies will meet.

The enemy was within yourself, within all of you. That is what will eat you away. Only your will stands in the way. And there is freedom in this. A long liberating laugh of freedom.

You know you have the strength, the colony has the strength. You will succeed.

***

Sam saw the flash of Percival's gun. Leary staggered back, smoke issuing from his coat. He grunted hoarsely, then ran forward again.

'No!' cried Sam and sprinted round the corner after him. The gun flashed once more and Leary took the brunt, right in the chest. Sam ducked round him as he fell and punched Percival in the mouth.

The Exec reeled in her chair, her red hair flying up with the force of the blow. The gun fell from her hand. As Sam spun round, Percival raised an arm. In her fist she held a flashing plastic egg. She aimed it at a slot in the terminal obviously designed to receive it. As if in slow motion, the digits on the terminal screen counted down from thirty to twenty-eight. Sam fumbled for Percival's arm just as she slammed the device down. And missed.

The Exec felt tremendously strong as Sam fought to pull her away. 'I'm in charge here!' she was screeching. 'I'm in command!'

'I'm sick of listening to you,' hissed Sam. 'Why don't you just shut your mouth?'

Percival head-butted her. Sam felt the sickening crunch of bone against bone as the room twisted and spun. It felt like her face had been smashed inside out. I'mso crap at violence, she thought dizzily, as the

floor rose to meet her.

She looked up. Double vision. Two hazy Percivals were slamming two satellite activators into two slots. The terminal shrilled loudly. Oh God, no. The numbers slid down to ten. She tried to pull herself up. She had to do something.

'I've won!' Percival screamed, clutching at the bruise on her head.'I've won!'

Three, two, one. As simple as that. Oh Doctor, I'm sorry, so sorry.

Sam waited for the blast.

***

How could you be so wrong? Pain, snakes of pain crawling up your chest. You stare at the numbers as they drop.

It's won. It's beaten you. You completed yourself too late.

***

The terminal flipped screens. Even Sam could make out the big red words flashing across it. COUNTDOWN ABORT.

COUNTDOWN ABORT.

'No. No,' Percival moaned, hands to her temples, blood streaming from her nose.

It had to be Horton. He had done it. He had disabled the firing program.

'It can't be! Why won't you work?' Percival was screaming. She punched at the computer keyboard, frantically typing the digits in over and over again.'You have to work!'

Sam leaned back and laughed. Of course. Of course.

Someone, Leary, stepped over her. Percival turned to him and Sam saw the tears in her eyes. 'It should have worked,' she said softly. 'I should have done it.'

Leary picked Percival up and threw her out of the room. Then he put his boot through the terminal screen. It shattered in a flash of light and flame. He collapsed over the mess he had made.

So they hadn't been needed after all. Sam leaned back, nursing her pounding head, an ironic smile pasted on to her lips.

The Installation shook once again from the force of the Face-Eater's attack.

Leary slumped down beside her. He was pale and stank of scorched flesh. He cradled his stomach. For a few seconds he stared at the floor. 'Well?' he asked, his breath wheezing dreadfully.

'Well,' said Sam. 'Now we just have to wait.'

***

The Face-Eater was retreating. Its vast bulk was descending again, falling away back into the ground.

The Doctor guessed that his attempts to wound the machine had been successful after all. The Face-Eater had been forced to loosen its grip on the Proximan natives enough to allow them to disconnect themselves from its control, to regain their individual identities. It didn't matter. All that was left was to finish the job.

He reached the platform, every millimetre of his body aching. Ahead of him, embedded in the rock wall, he saw half-buried metal pipes and a system of odd, circular wheels, like taps. Control panel? It had to be. This had to be the place where, centuries ago, the Proximans had willingly given up their free will, their individuality, in fear of some outside threat. And, in their fear, had successfully managed to conquer themselves completely.

He realised he was not alone on the platform. Cheeky Monkey squatted on his haunches next to him, watching him as intently as ever. As though he were looking right into me, thought the Doctor. What is going on in your mind?

Cheeky Monkey chittered at him, stumbling over to the rock and metal tapestry of wall. It waved a hairy arm, indicating the Doctor to follow. Tired again, he obeyed. Far below, the Face-Eater was twisting and

crunching in its home.

Close up, he saw that the rock wall was translucent, that liquid bubbled and churned behind it. Giant pistons thumped and pounded. Fluid spilled somewhere far below, sending sweeping echoes up into the cavern. The Doctor listened. This system of pumps and sluices had to be the operational link between the mechanical creation and the organic creature attached to it. Some kind of resonator to amplify its telepathy. Presumably, it reordered the operation of the Face-Eater. Reordered or reprogrammed.

A sudden lightness touched his heart. Cheeky Monkey stared up at him, as inscrutable as ever. 'We don't have to destroy it,' the Doctor told the little creature. The tiredness dissipated. 'We can reprogram it.'

Cheeky Monkey howled alarmingly. Perhaps it didn't understand him. He caught himself up in his own enthusiasm. 'The human colony is safe now. Nothing can stop them. Your race could be subsumed. I think you have a chance to work with the Terrans. I could help. We could work out these controls... I mean,you've probably still got it all stored up in your minds... you could use this power to build again. To keep yourselves going, rebuild your civilisation...'

No.

The voice from before. The one that had shown him the Face-Eater's origins. 'You don't understand,' the Doctor gabbled.'If I kill this creature you could lose everything.Your telepathy, your organisation, even your lives. No more group mind. It could be the end of you. It doesn't have to happen. We can work this out, I'm sure of it.'

No, said the true voice of Cheeky Monkey. Terminate the program. Kill the Face-Eater.

Frustrated, the Doctor turned to the creature that stared impassively at him.'You don't understand what you're asking me to do. It doesn't have to be this way.'

Do it.

Chapter Twenty
Out With the Old

Casey Burns was still alive. She couldn't believe it herself. It had all been so confusing. First, the strange hysteria that had gripped them when Percival had threatened to execute Leary and that girl. A blood sacrifice, like they were back in the Middle Ages. They had all been caught up with it, wanting her to do it, to go as far as she could. To bring order back to Proxima 2. It was just amazing how willing they were to become savages.

She was ashamed of herself. As if every vile thing, every act of cowardice and bloodlust and selfishness had been exposed in the last few hours. She had wanted those two dead, had bayed for blood along with the rest of them. How could she have done it? How much of herself had she been willing to give up, to be reassured that EVERYTHING WAS GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT and be a GOOD GIRL and just DO WHAT YOU'RE TOLD.

And then, the horror. The thing that had burst from the ground. She had known then just what being on another planet meant. All the nightmares, all the bad feelings, the sickness, it had all been real. It was going to kill them all.

She remembered running, she remembered that much. Crashing buildings, crushed bodies, everything was over.

She had seen people thrown into the air, their mouths working ferociously, perhaps trying to tell the world that it wasn't right, that it shouldn't end like this.

At last, it was gone. For now. As Casey squatted in the ruins of a building she had once worked in, she wondered what would happen next. That monster, would it come back for her? She stared at the body of the Installation guard who lay half buried in front of her, helmet crushed, gun lying in his outstretched fingers.

It had seemed there had been nowhere to run, nowhere it couldn't get you. The tentacles had crushed buildings, crushed people, and Casey Burns hadn't cared, had not the slightest concern for anyone else just as long as it didn't get her, that it let her live and take the others - not me. She remembered punching her way out of the plaza, trampling bodies to

get out of this deathtrap. Jesus, and this colony was supposed to show the best of humanity.

She thought about this young guard. How she had hidden from him, not wanting him to run into the little bit of shelter she had found. She had screamed at him to go away, sure that his presence would draw attention to her, that the sticky fingers would come and probe and pull her out screaming, squeezing her, squeezing.

She recalled the huge pile of concrete that had fallen on him, killing him, and how the pity, the shame, the guilt had flooded back into her. She'd been disgusted with herself.

Now she was numb. She didn't know what to do. She didn't even know how long she had been here or whether anyone else was still alive. She didn't know anything. All she knew was that this terrible day had gone and that night was here. And she still wasn't moving.

There was a shuffle of sliding rubble. Someone was coming.

Casey reached out and prised the gun out of the dead guard's gloved hand. She wasn't entirely sure whether she would use it on whatever was approaching or herself.

A grey, dusty figure picked its way over the mound of concrete. A dash of red hair provided the only colour. That and a crusty pancake of blood that covered her face.

Helen Percival.

Casey's leader slid down into her little shelter. She just stared at Percival, not knowing how to react. Dusty streaks of dried tears tracked down from her normally perfectly groomed eyes. Through the blood.

Percival stared at her. "Thank God,' she said nervously. "Thank God. They're after me. Back at the Installation. They think they've won but they're wrong. This colony's still mine. You can help me.'

Casey did not react when Percival put her arms on her shoulders and began to shake her, trying to get her to understand. 'It should have happened. It should have worked.You see that, don't you? I only wanted to do what was right.'

Casey raised the gun to Percival's temple. At close range... invariably fatal... The Exec acted as if she didn't know it was there. 'We can't let them win, you know. My reputation. So much resting on this. The future of humanity. They must not be allowed to get in the way of history.'

She tightened her finger on the trigger. Invariably...

'If a handful of us can resist, keep ourselves strong. Willpower.We can overcome. Take command. Those who are born to lead must have the courage to make those difficult decisions. We must be strong enough to do what must be done. You do understand that, don't you?'

'Oh yes,' said Casey. 'I understand.'

***

The desert. The mountains. Your home.

Away from the city, you realise you are free. No good trying to deny it:you don't belong, never will. Perhaps the mountains will provide the answer.

That crystal clarity remains, as if the charges from Percival's stun gun had fixed it in place for ever. Jacob Leary. Born Mars 2099. Inhabitant of Praxima 2.

As soon as the colony was complete, it no longer needed you. You are a flaw in its intricacy, necessary in conflict, redundant in renewal. Symbiotic in imbalance, dissonant in symmetry. Two complex structures unable to function as the whole.

The wagon bounces over sand and stone. The harsh sun pounds the cab.

You look across at the girl at your side. Combat trousers, vest, boots. Soft blonde hair. Sunglasses. Necklaces chinking over the terrain. Tough, deep, unreachable. You would like her to come with you but know she cannot. It wouldn't work anyway, you know that. You are beyond them all now.

You are home.

***

Sam leaned back as Leary gunned the engine harder. They'd been driving for nearly half a day now - crisscrossing their way into the mountains in search of the Doctor.

Sam could still hardly believe that the big fella was alive.'All right,' she'd said as he'd staggered from the infirmary six hours before. 'I wouldn't normally say this, but you're a real tough guy. Two squirts from the blaster was the end of you, I was sure of it.'

'I've had worse,' he'd replied, and he'd embraced her, wincing as the gel pack round his stomach squeezed his ribs.

Then they had found the wagon - the one they had been going to steal earlier - and had headed out into the wilderness.

Six hours of driving, and Sam's mouth was full of dust and sand.'Why couldn't you have nicked a motor with air cond-There!' she yelled suddenly.'Look!'

Leary put his foot down and drove in the direction of Sam's pointing finger. There was the Doctor, walking hand in hand with a white, stubby-haired creature, for all the world as though they were strolling in Hyde Park.

'Lovely morning,' said the Doctor as Sam leapt from the cab. 'How are you, Sam?' he asked warmly. 'It's been simply ages. Meet my friend Cheeky Monkey.'

'Cheeky Monkey,' the creature repeated.

She looked at the creature, then at the Doctor.

It really was him, not some ridiculous carbon copy. She couldn't believe she had ever been fooled. It must have been the fever. Mind you, he looked as if he'd gone for a full sixty-degree cycle and spin dry in a washing machine. The little creature clicked and ticked unemotionally at his side.

'Thank you for looking after Sam. Well done, Mr Leary.' He shook the ex-geologist's hand.

'I think she spent most of the time looking after me,' he replied, giving

her a wink.

'Yeah, yeah,' Sam said sardonically. 'Let's save all this Spielberg happy ending shall we. I'm starving and there isn't a decent cafe on this whole bloody rock.'

Leary climbed into the cabin and restarted the engine. Sam, who wasn't letting go of the Doctor's hand for anything, found herself pulled round to face the mountains. What exactly had happened in there?

'I knew you could do it,' she said softly.

'Do what?'

'Destroy that disgusting thing.'

'Oh, Sam.' He turned to face her. 'Of course I couldn'tdestroy it. That's not what I do.'

'Then, what happened?'

The Doctor looked down at Cheeky Monkey. Despite what the Doctor had said, as far as she was concerned, they were still bloody ugly.

'He did. After all, it was his machine. That was his job. He just didn't want to. I had a strict word with him. If he built it, he had to turn it off, not pass the buck on to me.'

'Pass the buck,' Cheeky Monkey squeaked and poked out his tongue.

'Yeah, as if you don't know you're doing that,' Sam snapped playfully. 'Like it's an involuntary movement.'

The Proximan poked out its tongue again.

'Well. I'm glad you're here with me again.Your double was hideous.'

'I thought they were exact copies.'

'So, learn from my words.'

He grinned and turned back to the mountains. Sam felt him sigh, felt something bothering him, some sadness.'What is it?'

He looked at Cheeky Monkey. As if waiting to be observed before it started showing off, it ran to the wagon and leapt on to the cab roof, shrieking with delight. "The Proximans. By switching off the Face-Eater they have effectively ended their race. No more group mind, just a bunch of very individualistic semi-intelligent mammals.'

'Why is that the end?'

'Because this is humanity's planet now. They'll never know just what was sacrificed for them. They'll never know.'

Sam stared out across the plain. She imagined the buildings, the freeways, the people who lived there in the future. How much it would be changed. Better or worse, she couldn't say. Certainty, she realised, belonged to the young. You grew out of it. She clapped the Doctor on the shoulder. 'Come on,' she said. 'Let's go somewhere.'

Bags dropped to the desert floor with a thump. Rucksack, cooler unit, tent.

'Not me,' said Leary. He jumped from the cab, shielding his eyes from the sun.

Sam frowned.'What?'

The Doctor squeezed her arm. She saw his lip quiver. Just once, but definitely a quiver. He was getting soft in his old age. 'I hope you find what you're looking for, Mr Leary,' he said. He walked to the cab and held out a hand. Leary clasped it in his giant's paw.

'I will,' he stated confidently. Then he surprised Sam by jogging over to her, picking her up and planting a big hairy kiss on her lips. He let go and she dropped to the ground with a whoosh of dust. She scratched her chin where his beard had tickled.

Leary climbed back into the cab again. The setting sun sent his shadow huge across the dull sand. He slammed the door.

'Oi! You're not going to leave us here are you?' Sam yelled.

Leary's obscured figure stretched out its arms and unleashed a huge, liberated booming laugh. It seemed that the mountains rang with the

sound.'You'II find your way!' he bellowed joyously. He gunned the engine and, with a churn of dust, the wagon rolled towards the mountains, Cheeky Monkey screeching with delight on its roof.

'Come on, Sam,' said the Doctor.

'What a git. He could have given us a lift.' She smiled, just to show she wasn't being serious. The Doctor began to pick up the equipment the Martian had left for them. Sam watched the wagon disappearing in the distance. "That's gratitude for you.'

She turned round, trying to see the city through the heat haze and dust. Nothing but tyre tracks. Not a single sign, no marker that humans were on this planet at all. Unspoilt, clean. For now.

Together again, the Doctor and Sam commenced their long walk back to Proxima City and the TARDIS. She kept one arm round him all the way.

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